

Navigating the pandemic: Gendered perspectives on vulnerability, resilience and institutional change in times of crisis

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Received: 24-05-2023
Accepted: 24-05-2023
Published: 13-07-2023

Recommended citation: LÓPEZ BELLOSO, María and STRID, Sofia (2023). "Navigating the pandemic: Gendered perspectives on vulnerability, resilience and institutional change in times of crisis". *Papers*, 108 (3), e3243. <<https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/papers.3243>>

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a multifaceted crisis, impacting health, the economy, policy and society at large, and also resulting in a humanitarian crisis. These crises have impacted everyone, although the effects have been unevenly distributed, leading to further disadvantage and marginalisation for those who were already vulnerable and marginalised. The pandemic laid bare and intensified pre-existing gender inequalities in many aspects of life, from the labor market and educational opportunities to health and social protection systems. The unequal impacts on women and men have been observed in the economy and employment, in domestic work and care, in physical and mental health, and in violence.

The collection of articles in this special issue critically interrogates these key issues relating to the impact of the pandemic on gender equality in Europe, highlighting exacerbated gender inequalities, policy responses and the potential for a gender-responsive recovery. This special issue brings together a collection of eight articles that investigate various aspects of gender inequality exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and that explore potential pathways towards achieving greater gender equality in the post-pandemic world. They summarise the findings and contributions of several social scientists and also of two EU funded projects: RESISTIRÉ (GA 101015990) and GEARING Roles (GA 824536). The

articles are structured around five main themes: labor market disparities, education and skill development, social and political responses, post-pandemic opportunities, and care. Each article contributes unique insights, empirical findings and policy recommendations from a feminist perspective to enrich the ongoing discourse on gender equality. Together, the articles show the necessity of feminist analysis of crisis, and reveal the structural roots of inequalities while simultaneously emphasising the necessity for transformative action to address inequalities.

Keywords: care; COVID-19; crisis; decision-making; economy; education; gender; gender equality; policy responses; violence

Resumen. *Explorando la pandemia: perspectivas de género sobre vulnerabilidad, resiliencia y cambio institucional en tiempos de crisis*

La pandemia de COVID-19 ha sido una crisis multifacética que ha impactado en la salud, la economía, las políticas públicas y la sociedad en general, y que también ha provocado una crisis humanitaria. Estas crisis han afectado a todas las personas, aunque los efectos se han distribuido de manera desigual, lo que ha provocado más desventajas y marginación para las que ya eran vulnerables y estaban marginadas. La pandemia ha dejado al descubierto y ha intensificado las desigualdades de género preexistentes en muchos aspectos de la vida, desde el mercado laboral y las oportunidades educativas hasta los sistemas de salud y de protección social. Se han observado impactos desiguales en mujeres y hombres en la economía y el empleo, en el trabajo doméstico y los cuidados, en la salud física y mental, y en la violencia contra las mujeres.

La colección de artículos recogidos en este monográfico examina de manera crítica estos temas clave relacionados con el impacto de la pandemia en la igualdad de género en Europa. Destacan las desigualdades de género exacerbadas, las respuestas políticas y el potencial de una recuperación sensible al género. Este número especial reúne una colección de ocho artículos que profundizan en diversos aspectos de la desigualdad de género exacerbada por la pandemia de COVID-19 y que exploran posibles vías hacia una mayor igualdad de género en el mundo postpandemia. En ellos se resumen los hallazgos y las contribuciones de varias científicas sociales y también de dos proyectos financiados por la UE: RESISTIRÉ (GA 101015990) y GEARING Roles (GA 824536). Los artículos se estructuran en torno a cinco temas principales: disparidades en el mercado laboral, educación y desarrollo de habilidades, respuestas sociales y políticas, oportunidades postpandemia y cuidados. Cada artículo aporta perspectivas únicas, hallazgos empíricos y recomendaciones políticas desde una perspectiva feminista para enriquecer el discurso actual sobre la igualdad de género. En conjunto, los artículos muestran la necesidad de un análisis feminista de la crisis y revelan las raíces estructurales de las desigualdades, al mismo tiempo que enfatizan la necesidad de una acción transformadora para abordar las desigualdades.

Palabras clave: cuidado; COVID-19; crisis; economía; educación; género; igualdad de género; respuestas políticas; toma de decisiones; violencia

Summary

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a health crisis as well as a humanitarian, economic and social one, affecting us all, albeit unequally. The pandemic laid bare and intensified pre-existing gender inequalities in various aspects of life, from the labor market and educational opportunities to health and social protection systems (Axelsson et al., 2021). The differential impacts of the crisis on women and men have been observed in areas such as employment, domestic work, caregiving and mental health (Sandström et al., 2022, 2021; Stovell et al., 2021, 2022). Feminist analyses reveal the structural roots of these inequalities and emphasise the necessity for transformative action to address them.

According to Strid et al. (2022), the pandemic shifted social structures and organisation, and the impacts of this were gendered. As a group, women have been hit harder by the political responses than men; an inequality that increases depending on their class, age, migration status and other inequality grounds (Axelsson et al., 2021; Sandström et al., 2022, 2023). While for some the shift towards a stronger online existence (through, e.g., telework or online shopping) improved access to work, others became unemployed, experienced increased levels of violence or financial difficulties, or suffered physical and mental illness – all consequences of “normal” societal supports being disrupted or halted during the pandemic.

As governments and organisations grapple with the far-reaching implications of the pandemic, it is crucial to examine the specific ways in which the crisis has impacted different social groups, particularly in terms of gender and gendered inequalities. This is crucial not least to equip policymakers with evidence-based recommendations for inclusive crisis management in the future, including crisis responses which mitigate rather than exacerbate existing inequalities.¹ Crouze et al. affirm that social inequalities during pandemics create an unevenly distributed risk of disease due to three main factors: 1) exposure to the virus (including, e.g., the capacity to self-isolate and work remotely); 2) biological conditioning to the virus (including, e.g., gender, age, and host immunity); and 3) access to treatment and health coverage (Crouzet, 2022). Further, the impact of the pandemic can also be exacerbated by socioeconomic or ethnic disparities (Blumenshine et al., 2008). The focus on gender equality in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic is particularly pertinent, given the region’s commitment to promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment through various policies and initiatives (EC, 2020c), and also considering that women were the majority among first-line respondents (EIGE, 2020; Bahri, 2020). Therefore, they were exposed to infection and psychological stress; more women than men lost their jobs; and women took over most of the care responsibilities, in turn disrupting their professional paths (Carli, 2020).

This Special Issue critically interrogates these key issues relating to the impact of the pandemic on gender equality in Europe, highlighting the exacer-

1. See RESISTIRÉ Factsheets, RESISTIRÉ Community on Zenodo: <https://zenodo.org/communities/resistire/?page=1&size=20>

bated gender inequalities, the policy responses, and the potential for a gender-responsive recovery. It brings together contributions from different European projects funded by the European Commission and from renowned feminist scholars and external experts on the gendered impact of public policies in different domains, including policy (multi-governance), care, violence, and education and research. First, the RESISTIRÉ (2021-2023) project, funded by the European Commission H2020. RESISTIRÉ (RESponding to outbreakS through co-creaTive sustainable inclusive equality stRatEgies) aims to understand and create operational recommendations to mitigate the social, economic, political and environmental impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak and its policy and societal responses on existing inequalities in 31 countries (EU-27, Iceland, Serbia, Turkey and the UK) and to work towards individual and societal resilience. This is achieved by mapping and collecting data, and by analysing and translating these insights into solutions to be deployed by policymakers, stakeholders and actors in the field in different policy domains. Second, the Gearing ROLES (2019-2022) project (Gender Equality Actions in Research Institutions to traNsform Gender ROLES), also funded under EC H2020, which is aimed at promoting institutional change in universities and research organisations, and which has addressed the impact of the pandemic on equality policies.

2. Gender inequalities exacerbated during the pandemic

The *economy* has been a key policy domain for policy responses. Existing gender inequalities were exacerbated by the pandemic, challenging the provision of equal rights for men and women. Women traditionally take on a large share of care and household work, and therefore they were more affected by increased care duties during the crisis. These duties increased especially due to schools and childcare institutions closing, and older people's need for additional care support (Blaskó et al., 2020). Despite being a crisis across multiple policy domains, the pandemic was especially a care crisis, in which substantial evidence shows a gendered and intersectional impact, especially from an economic point of view (Strid et al., 2022). According to OECD (2020), the public health crisis of COVID-19 rapidly turned into a job crisis, with crucial economic consequences. The economic impact of the pandemic was so evident that many of the areas of public policy intervention during the pandemic, especially during the first phase of social isolation, focused on ensuring the maintenance of employment and income (Cibin et al., 2021). The economic downturn and job losses have also affected women disproportionately, with sectors that predominantly employ women, such as hospitality and tourism, being severely hit. The private sector has a significant role to play in promoting gender equality, both within their organisations and through their impact on society. Adopting and implementing gender-sensitive policies, such as flexible work arrangements, equal pay and gender diversity in leadership, can contribute to a more equitable workplace and can foster an environment that values and supports women's contributions.

The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of women's leadership and participation in decision-making processes, as countries with women leaders have often demonstrated effective and empathetic responses to the crisis. Strengthening women's political representation and empowering them to participate in shaping policies and programs that affect women's lives are critical for achieving gender equality in the post-pandemic era. The relationship between gender equality and public policy is complex: partly as gender equality is a political priority, and partly as women's leadership itself can be central in promoting successful policy measures, which in turn will also result in the promotion of gender equality (Paula, 2020). However, findings from RESISTIRÉ show that most of the pandemic-related measures identified in the national reports were created at the level of the national government (with some exceptions observed in countries with a more federal system), sometimes with the support of expert committees created ad hoc to deal with the emergency, and in many countries the relevant decision-making positions were mainly held by men (Cibin et al., 2021).

Gender-based violence is a cause and consequence of gendered inequalities. Globally, one in three women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner; or sexual violence in their lifetime (Devries, 2013; World Bank, 2022). Furthermore, the pandemic has led to a surge in gender-based violence, with women experiencing heightened vulnerability due to lockdown measures, combined with limited access to support services, which in many countries were shut down due to not being considered essential. Studies on help-seeking show increases in calls to hotlines and contacts with shelters (EIGE, 2021). They also show that victims/survivors seek psychological care from their general practitioners rather than from the criminal justice system and the police, meaning they may receive less support and access to resources. While help-seeking through contact with shelters has increased, there are cases of the opposite happening: some feminist organisations have pointed to the difficulty women faced contacting support services during lockdown without the knowledge of a violent partner.

Overburdened, unpaid care work and its effect on women's mental health and well-being has been a significant pandemic policy and research area. Domestic responsibilities increased during lockdown periods for most households, and particularly for those with children or other dependents, who were unable to receive care support from external institutions. Women globally tended to shoulder more of this increased care burden than men (Fodor et al., 2023). This increased burden on women is considered to be a proven personal stressor (Bulog et al., 2022).

The gendered nature of unpaid work became more apparent during the pandemic (Seedat & Rondon, 2021). Data provided by UN Women in April 2020 found that among women surveyed in different Asian countries, between 49% and 68% reported spending more time on domestic chores compared to men (UN WOMEN, 2020). These data, coupled with the perceived gendered moral obligation to care, results in a worsening of the well-being of women with dependents (European Value Survey, 2018).

3. Policy and social responses to the pandemic

Government measures to address gender inequalities during the pandemic have been a focus of much pandemic research. A wealth of evidence has shown how governmental responses to the pandemic did not sufficiently address gendered inequalities; existing inequalities increased and new inequalities emerged, including the deepening and widening economic gaps, a re-traditionalisation of gender roles, and increasing levels and new forms of gender-based violence (Axelsson et al., 2021; Sandström et al., 2022; Stovell et al., 2021). With a focus on European economic recovery (EC, 2022), later recovery policy – coordinated through the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility of the Next-GenerationEU fund – set up to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic, was also criticised for not taking gendered inequalities sufficiently into account (Cibin et al., 2022). An in-depth comparative analysis of the European national recovery responses, including the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) of 26 European countries and equivalent policies in an additional five European countries (Cibin et al., 2022) shows that while most NRRPs included some policy measures aimed at mitigating gender inequalities (often in the policy areas of employment, education and care), in most cases gender was predominantly reduced to descriptive diagnosis and general reflections of contexts. The NRRPs show a significant lack of gendered analysis of the prognosis and of concrete solutions. Furthermore, while the NRRPs address women as a workforce, there is a striking lack of measures on gender dimensions of decision-making and violence. The NRRPs embedded stereotypes positioning gendered patterns in access to the labour market and income as “women’s problems” relating to the lack of the correct skills or education; women need to develop and learn (men’s) management skills. Finally, there is a complete lack of intersectional understandings of inequality in the NRRPs; when responses and measures do address multiple inequality grounds (e.g. age, disability and social class), these are presented as single strands operating in silos, without a consideration of how they interact. The rich analysis of the national recovery responses has led some commentators to refer to pandemic policy as a missed opportunity to restructure society and build back better (Sandström et al., 2022).

Initiatives by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society groups have been crucial to support and protect vulnerable groups. Where governmental responses fell short, inspirational civil societal initiatives emerged to mitigate gendered and other inequalities and to support the most vulnerable (Strid et al., 2022).² Such civil societal initiatives and practices contributed to reducing, and – in some cases – reversing, the increase in inequalities caused by the pandemic and the policy responses to it. These initiatives and practices were made possible because of specific features and actions that enabled NGOs and other civil societal organisations to

2. Better stories of the pandemic. Available at: <https://resistire-project.eu/better-stories-europe/>

navigate the challenges of the pandemic and offer effective support where governments and public authorities often fell short (Cibin et al., 2023). First, civil society organisations managed to respond quickly to the crisis, using improvisational skills that drew on previous knowledge of tensions between experience and creativity; on internal organisational reflexivity; and on attention to the skills and autonomy of volunteers and staff. Second, and often in contrast to governmental responses, a strong sense of community and mutual trust operated as the backbone of civil society organisations, on which activities were built. The building blocks of this backbone consisted of empathy, solidarity and mutual trust, both between users and beneficiaries, with the beneficiaries themselves considered to be “agents of their own change, and supported through tailored responses that reflect the differences between people” (Cibin et al., 2023); and within civil society organisations, where attention was paid to inclusive and participatory decision-making and the well-being of staff and volunteers. Further, we have witnessed empathy, solidarity and trust in civil society organisations’ communication and outreach activities, which has challenged and changed our understanding of vulnerabilities. Finally, in civil societal responses to the pandemic, we have witnessed new alliances and collaborations across inequality grounds and beyond group interests and identities, including collaborations that allowed for the sharing of knowledge and resources to find solutions and to fill the gaps left by public authority responses. This last point underlines the ability of civil society to mobilise intersectionally, paying attention to diversity as a strength, both in relation to users and in relation to the very organisation of civil society.

Higher education and research institutions have a multifaceted role in promoting gender equality. They can contribute through access and enrollment initiatives, inclusive curricula, diverse leadership, gender-focused research, equitable policies, and partnerships for advocacy. By actively addressing gender disparities within their own institutions and influencing broader society, they can create a positive impact toward achieving gender equality.

Aware of this transformative potential, the European Union has been committed to promoting public policies that foster institutional change and progress in the European Higher Education Area (EC, 2020a; EC, 2021). However, the pandemic has meant a step backwards in the gender agenda in higher education institutions. Aware of this negative impact, the EU itself has implemented different measures to address sex and gender aspects of the crisis, including a case study on the sex and gender impact of the COVID-19 pandemic carried out by the European Commission’s Expert Group on Gendered Innovation (EC, 2020b) and their report on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This report highlights the pandemic’s gendered impact on academic productivity, early-career researchers, and work-life balance (EC, 2023). However, most analyses have focused on the impact of the pandemic on women as individuals, and little attention has been paid to the impact of the pandemic on institutions and processes of structural change.

4. Challenges and opportunities for gender equality post-pandemic

As shown above, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on many aspects of gender equality, exacerbating pre-existing gender disparities and creating new barriers for women and marginalised groups. To ensure a just and sustainable recovery, it is crucial to *adopt inclusive and equitable economic and social recovery policies that promote inclusivity, equity and gender equality.*

Addressing economic disparities: The pandemic has significantly affected women's economic participation, leading to job losses, increased unpaid care responsibilities, and limited access to economic opportunities. (ILO, 2021; Mascherini & Nivakoski, 2021). Inclusive policies should focus on creating and supporting good quality work, promoting fair wages, and ensuring equal access to economic resources and opportunities for women (EC, 2023). Moreover, as stated by the RESISTIRE project, a “holistic and human rights approach to address poverty and social exclusion” is necessary to address economic inequalities and fight poverty and meet the goals of the 2030 Agenda.³

Recognising and reducing unpaid care work: The pandemic has highlighted the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work borne by women. Inclusive policies should recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid care responsibilities by investing in social infrastructure, such as affordable and quality childcare facilities, eldercare support, and paid family leave policies. However, RESISTIRE findings showed that the initial policy responses to the pandemic rarely mainstreamed gender (Cibin et al., 2022), and the analysis of European recovery plans also indicated a lack of a gender-sensitive approach, and excessive focus on male-dominated sectors, resulting in limited situational policy responses to the care gap.

Strengthening social protection systems: Inclusive policies should prioritise strengthening social protection systems to provide a safety net for vulnerable populations, including women and marginalised groups. This can involve expanding access to healthcare, income support and social assistance programs. Additionally, targeted measures should be implemented to address the specific needs of marginalised groups such as women from racial and ethnic minorities, indigenous women and women with disabilities.

Investing in education and skills development: To achieve gender equality, it is crucial to invest in education and skills development programs that are accessible to all regardless of gender. Policies should aim to eliminate gender-based stereotypes in education, promote girls' enrollment and retention in schools, and provide training and re-skilling opportunities for women in emerging sectors. Additionally, efforts should be made to bridge the digital gender divide by promoting women's access to technology and digital literacy (Cibin et al., 2022).

3. See RESISTIRE Factsheets, RESISTIRE Community on Zenodo: <https://zenodo.org/communities/resistire/?page=1&size=20>

Promoting gender-responsive governance and decision-making: Inclusive policies should strive to increase women's representation and participation in decision-making processes at all levels. This can be achieved by implementing affirmative action measures, promoting women's leadership, and ensuring diverse representation in political, economic and social institutions. Gender-responsive governance ensures that policies and programs take into account the specific needs and experiences of women, leading to more equitable outcomes.

By adopting inclusive and equitable policies for economic and social recovery, societies can rebuild in a way that addresses the systemic barriers faced by women and marginalised groups, promotes gender equality, and paves the way for a more inclusive and sustainable future.

The importance of gender mainstreaming in decision-making and policymaking cannot be underestimated. In light of these exacerbated gender inequalities, feminist perspectives call for gender-responsive policy responses and effective strategies to address the gendered impacts of the pandemic, as well as to identify opportunities for fostering gender equality in the recovery process. The unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic have necessitated urgent and coordinated political and social responses at various levels, ranging from public health measures to economic recovery strategies. A feminist approach to policymaking emphasises the importance of centering gender equality, social justice and inclusiveness in these responses, with a focus on addressing the specific needs and vulnerabilities of diverse groups in society.

The implementation of gender-sensitive policies, such as emergency childcare provisions, support for informal workers, and measures to address gender-based violence, have been essential in mitigating the gendered consequences of the pandemic. Economic stimulus packages and social protection measures should be gender-responsive and inclusive, reflecting a thorough understanding of gender-specific vulnerabilities and needs. Initiatives targeting women's economic empowerment, such as financial support for women-owned businesses and skills development programs, can contribute to a more equitable recovery process.

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the persistent gender inequalities in society, presenting both challenges and opportunities for advancing gender equality in the post-pandemic world. Feminist perspectives emphasise the need for concerted efforts from governments, international organisations, the private sector and civil society to address these challenges while seizing opportunities for transformative change.

5. Structure and focus of this special issue

This special issue brings together a collection of seven articles that examine various aspects of gender inequality exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and explore potential pathways towards achieving greater gender equality in the post-pandemic world.

The articles are structured around four main themes: labor market disparities; education and skills development; social and political responses; and

post-pandemic opportunities. A fifth theme centering on care is also explored. Each article contributes unique insights, empirical findings and policy recommendations from a feminist perspective to enrich the ongoing discourse on gender equality.

Several articles in this issue focus on the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women's employment and economic opportunities. The article "Essential and forgotten. Domestic work and the impact of policy responses during the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain and Italy" by Tarragona and Ghidoni compares pandemic policy in the care domain in Italy and Spain, and how the impacts of policy restrictions on domestic workers – a highly feminised and racialised sector – have not been paid significant attention by policymakers, contrary to public debates. Thematically, the article examines the gendered nature of job losses and reduced work hours, the implications of remote work on gender dynamics within the household, and the need for policies that support women's participation in the labor force and their economic empowerment. The latter theme of the economy is also explored in "Gender mainstreaming in times of crisis: Missed opportunities in pandemic policymaking" by Callerstig and Strid, which looks at gendered inequalities in pandemic economic policymaking in Sweden, a country considered to be an ideal case for gender mainstreaming but which nonetheless failed to integrate gender in its economic recovery policy. The theme of gender dynamics in the household is explored from the angle of a (gendered) care crisis. in "The moral assumption of care for parents: A gender issue?" by Aristegui, Beloki and Silvestre. Their article analyses the European Values Study as applied to five countries that represent different cultural models, and asks whether the moral responsibility of caring for older people in Europe corresponds to gender issues or to cultural and institutional issues, related to social welfare models. The article demonstrates that while the job of caring for older people continues to carry a strong component of moral responsibility, it simultaneously varies with different social welfare models.

The gendered consequences of the pandemic on education and skill development are addressed in two of the articles. "Vulnerabilities in the face of the health crisis: Impact of COVID-19 on the educational processes of children and adolescent ion situations of neglect" by González, Izaguirre and Arrieta assesses the ways in which school closures and remote learning have affected girls and young women, the potential long-term consequences of these disruptions on gender equality in education, and the importance of targeted interventions to ensure equal access to quality education for all. Education is also the focus of "The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on institutional change processes and the collective capacities of higher education and research institutions" by Campanini, López Belloso and Mergaert, which draws on the capabilities approach to explore the institutional impact of the pandemic and its context on collective capabilities and gender structural change processes in the implementation of Gender Equality Plans in higher education institutions.

Social and political responses to the pandemic from a gender perspective are explored in three articles: “Essential and forgotten: Domestic work and the impact of policy responses during the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain and Italy” by Tarragona & Ghidoni; “Gender mainstreaming in times of crisis: Missed opportunities in pandemic policymaking” by Callerstig and Strid; and “The impact of intergovernmental relations in the management of COVID on women’s leadership” by Novo-Arbona. These evaluate the effectiveness of gender-responsive policies in mitigating the negative effects of the crisis on women, the role of women’s leadership in shaping pandemic responses, and the importance of gender-sensitive social protection systems in supporting vulnerable populations.

Lastly, the article “Facing yet another crisis? Gender-based violence policies at the Spanish local level during COVID-19” by Paleo, Alonso and Diz, and the two articles mentioned above, by Callerstig and Strid, and Novo-Arbona, discuss the challenges and opportunities for advancing gender equality in the aftermath of the pandemic, and look to the future of gender equality in policymaking. While Paleo, Alonso and Diz focus on the future challenges in gender-based violence policy and research, Callerstig and Strid examine the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of Sweden, and make recommendations for gender equal economic policymaking in future crisis. Novo-Arbona examines the form rather than the content of policymaking, and explores the very presence of women in policymaking. The three articles highlight the potential for transformative change through the adoption of gender-responsive recovery strategies, the promotion of women’s leadership and political participation, and the importance of collaboration among various stakeholders to address the underlying structural inequalities that perpetuate gender disparities.

Throughout this Special Issue, common themes emerge, such as the need for gender-responsive policies, the importance of women’s leadership and representation in decision-making, and the potential for transformative change in the post-pandemic era. These themes underscore the urgency of addressing gender inequality, and the opportunities presented by the crisis to reimagine and reshape a more just and equitable future. Together, the articles in this volume provide new directions for future research and inclusive policymaking.

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