



June 2020

IN BRIEF

Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

Thinking Europe, our Common House
#StaySafeStayInformed

Putting Women at the Heart of Europe's Recovery

Frances Fitzgerald MEP

People across Europe are suffering. They are scared of becoming ill, uncertain about their economic future and still worried about the well-being of their parents and grandparents.

But men and women are feeling this crisis [differently](#). For example, while more men than women are tragically dying from COVID-19, more women are on the frontlines providing care, with women accounting for almost 80% of healthcare workers, 76% of the 49 million care workers, and 82% of cashiers within the EU. The impact of this virus is different for men and women, and to build a recovery that works for all people, we must acknowledge this core difference and tailor our response to it.

This tailored response goes for both frontline workers and those stuck at home during the lockdown period. [Reports](#) indicate that domestic violence figures have surged. In addition, women have been thrust into a permanent 24-hour care role, often combined with full-time employment. While husbands and partners have been contributing to running the household during this pandemic more than ever before, many women have had to work late into the night to catch up on work they missed during the day, because of the added responsibility of home-schooling and caring for their children around the clock.

Women's roles during this crisis are multiple, and their experiences are varied. Yet the fact that they are happening in a vacuum without external interference gives us the opportunity to see clearly where the problems are. We must now seek change.

Tackling each of these challenges is a moral imperative: if we are to truly value women in our society it is our obligation to take action in the following areas. However, we must also

acknowledge that such action – in placing women at the heart of Europe's Recovery – will also have huge economic benefits which will play an important role in returning our fragile societies to growth.

Tackling Violence Against Women

Violence within the home, of any kind, is absolutely unacceptable. While utterly abhorrent as a concept, it also comes at an economic [cost](#) to Europe, estimated at €258 billion. Whether it is physical violence, financial control, psychological harassment, or coercive control, we must be unambivalent when dealing with all forms of violence.

Thankfully, we already have some of the tools we need to deal with violence. The Istanbul Convention became effective in 2014, and we have already been considering EU ratification for a number of years. Our message must be clear: the EU and the Member States will ratify and implement the Convention. Otherwise, women will keep dying needlessly. It really is that simple.

While we wait for a decision from the Court of Justice as to the ratification protocol, we can already move ahead with tackling violence by other means, such as adding violence against women to the list of Euro-crimes, as set out in the EU Treaties, or alternatively a Directive to tackle gender-based violence. The European Union has long championed its commitment to people: we cannot dither as women continue to suffer.

The Real Value of Women's Work

The second area deserving our attention is how we value the work that women do. Women are often in the lowest-paid jobs, and yet doing the most valuable work. Right now, they are caring for our older citizens,

healing our sick, and cleaning everywhere: grocery stores, hospitals, even homes. And these are just for-mal employment roles.

Behind the scenes, for centuries, women have been providing care, unnoticed, and yet presumed. This ranges from caring for babies and children after school, to providing care to those with disabilities along with older relatives and neighbours. As this crisis unfolds, making us question which work is essential, and how we value said work, we must lay down a principle: that we are committed to closing the gender employment gap. The gender employment gap is the difference between women and men in labour market participation, employment, and economic status. It is estimated to [cost](#) Europe €370 billion per year.

So how to close that gap? The first issue must be to address the difference in earnings. Currently in Europe, for every euro a man earns, a woman earns 84 cents. This is unacceptable, and we must live up to the vision enshrined in the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, *“the principle of equal pay for male and female workers for equal work or work of equal value”*.

When the European Commission presents a proposal for binding pay transparency measures later this year, we must seek an ambitious Directive that seeks to introduce clear criteria for assessing the value of work, gender pay audits, and reports to guarantee equal pay, as well as targets for companies. We can take action to close the gender pay gap whilst working alongside businesses, particularly SMEs, as to not overburden them as they recover from the COVID-19 crisis. This is a concrete step towards actually showing our gratitude to frontline workers and supporting our words with action.

A new European Carers Strategy

The third critical area must be a European Carers Strategy. Care responsibilities come into every aspect of a woman's potential to succeed in the economy. Maternity leave and care responsibilities for new-borns and young children is a critical juncture in a career; many who leave the labour force at that point never return. Care responsibilities also govern a woman's potential to be an entrepreneur and to establish her own business. Caring for young families and older relatives impacts a woman's overall earnings, therefore exacerbating the gender pension gap, which currently stands at 40% in Europe.

With many migrants providing care in hospitals and care homes across Europe, we must also consider the cross-border nature of this work, acknowledging

that we would be at a significant detriment without these essential workers. A European Carers Strategy is imperative to address the issues around care and to learn more about how care is provided and received across the EU.

Maximising the untapped potential of women

However, we can also use this crisis as an opportunity to build a more sustainable economy. Take, for example, women in the fields of digital, Artificial Intelligence, and STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and maths). The potential [gains](#) from including women in these fields amounts to a €16 billion GDP boost to the European economy.

As we begin to reopen businesses across Europe, it is likely that our shockingly high unemployment figures will not fall back as dramatically as they increased. We must take advantage of the skills that women have and encourage female participation in these crucial sectors. The European Industrial Strategy that was [proposed](#) by the European Commission in March 2020 is an ideal instrument to do so, and one that we must exploit further for this purpose.

Historic opportunity

While recognising the devastation that COVID-19 has caused, and the immense threat we still face, we should also acknowledge that the crisis gives us a historic opportunity to rebuild our societies and our economies in a way that rebalances the scales between men and women. It is time that we take advantage and invest in the true value of women and their potential as entrepreneurs, as innovators, as business executives, and as caregivers.

To conclude, this virus has exposed many of Europe's strategic weaknesses. Long and complicated supply chains, dependencies on partners which are subject to wider political considerations and a shortage of essential goods are those that remain in the media headlines. However, Europe's failure to fully recognise the undervalued potential of women to the wider economy is undoubtedly another weakness. Women across Europe have huge potential to contribute to our economies in many different ways. But to do so, we must design an economic recovery that works for them. We must put women at the heart of Europe's recovery.

Frances Fitzgerald MEP is a former Deputy Prime Minister of Ireland. She currently sits on both the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON) and the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) in the European Parliament.

The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP), dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and likeminded political values.

This publication receives funding from the European Parliament.

© 2020 Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies
The European Parliament and the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies assume no responsibility for facts or opinions expressed in this publication or their subsequent use.

Sole responsibility lies with the author of this publication.

Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies
Rue du Commerce 20
Brussels, BE – 1000
<http://www.martenscentre.eu>