

TIME

Why the Coronavirus Outbreak Could Hit Women Hardest



A traveler wears a medical mask at Grand Central station on March 5, 2020 in New York City.
David Dee Delgado—Getty Images

IDEAS *Scharff is cofounder and CEO of The Fuller Project, a nonprofit newsroom that reports on women.*

At 10:30 p.m. on Tuesday, I got a text message saying my children's school in D.C. would close the next day for a deep cleaning. I'm a single mom and am lucky to have caregiving and extended family support in moments like this, but I'm also viscerally aware of what other single mothers go through. The note made me realize just how hard the COVID-19 pandemic is going to hit women.

Since the first schools shuttered in Washington State last Monday, widespread school closure seems inevitable. Women are as much as **ten times** more likely than men to stay home from work with sick children, and there are **five times as many single mothers** as single fathers in the United States. With over 40 million children in pre-K through grade 8 in U.S. public schools, and more in charters, private schools and day cares, a great deal of parents—mostly mothers—are facing missed work days.

Women also disproportionately hold jobs in industries with poor protections, such as paid family leave and paid sick leave, without which they can't afford to miss days of work to care for children or elderly relatives—let alone themselves. Two-thirds of tipped restaurant workers in the United States are women, who already face

low-wages, unreliable hours, and few benefits, as reported in **TIME Magazine** in partnership with The Fuller Project in September. Fifty-five percent of workers in the restaurant industry and accommodations sector **do not have paid leave**, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The inability of women to stay home when sick clearly creates additional risk for everyone.

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And women are disproportionately represented in fields that will expose them to contagion, including professional care-giving roles for the elderly. Only 30% of surveyed nurses said that their employer has sufficient Personal Protective Equipment stock on hand to protect staff if there is a rapid surge in patients with possible coronavirus infections, according to a statement by **National Nurses United**. Women comprise **92 percent** of nurses.

Staying home is not an option for **Amparo Ramirez**, a 38-year old single mother who works preparing food in Los Angeles International Airport. She has no sick leave left and no health insurance, reports California Health Report. Meanwhile, jobs in the restaurant industry are likely to get cut as **customers increasingly eat at home** to avoid contagion.

For women with no social support system, the economic hardship of this pandemic could be even more immeasurable. “Our clients are already at a heightened state of alert, trauma and anxiety,” Mercedes

Lemp, Executive Director of *My Sister's Place* shelter for battered women, told me yesterday. "We have clients who can't be isolated and are living in a communal space." In a given day, about 40,000 adults and children are in shelters or in housing with support from local domestic violence programs, according to the [National Network to End Domestic Violence](#).

I've volunteered at the shelter (my sister is their board chair), playing with the kids while the women hurriedly eat after a long work day. Many of the women are entry-level service workers. If children are out of school, they will have to stay in the shelter and watch them. For those women who recently graduated to living with their kids in an apartment with rent support from the shelter, losing their jobs would mean they don't have income for food and utilities.

Further, domestic violence is known to increase in times of economic hardship—a possibility that most shelters are not resourced to address. The number of domestic violence cases reported to local police in Hubei province, in China, has nearly tripled in February after many people were quarantined in January due to the virus, as reported by [Axios](#).

Senate Democrats attempted to quickly pass legislation this week to require employers to pay sick leave, including 14 days during a public health emergency like this one. Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN) blocked the initiative, saying Washington should cover those costs, not employers. [California](#) is taking a different tact, with their

Employment Development Department: Residents can file a paid family leave or a disability claim if they need to miss work due to infection or quarantine or to care for a family member with the COVID-19 virus.

We've seen time and time again that amid political, economic, and health crises, issues that impact vulnerable populations get shoved to the side. During the 2015 Ebola outbreak in **Sierra Leone**, as schools shut, girls carried a heavy caretaking burden, but were also at heightened risk of sexual abuse and teen pregnancy. Despite the danger of **Zika** for pregnant women, Brazilian women still struggled to access contraception and reproductive care. Our leaders must remember that the coronavirus pandemic is a gender issue and an equity issue—one that requires dedicated attention and response for the most vulnerable women, in order to protect us all.

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