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Community, work, and family in times of COVID-19

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Introduction

We are living in challenging and uncertain times. At the time this article was edited, there were already more than 2.4 million confirmed cases of the corona virus (COVID-19) (World Health Organization, 2020). Nearly every country across the globe is struggling to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus and limit its health, societal, and economic consequences. The full impact on community, work, family, and its intersections is not yet clear. As the Editorial Board of *Community, Work & Family*, we share a deep concern for the potential impact of this global health pandemic. We similarly stand in awe to all the communities, workers, and families doing their utmost to combat it.

In this article, we do not attempt to provide definitive answers or even recommendations to address the problems we are witnessing. We do, however, feel the need to raise a collective voice about the significant potential for increased inequality. COVID-19 is *not* a great leveler. In all likelihood, COVID-19 will exacerbate existing inequalities, both in its immediate consequences resulting from the drastic measures taken to contain its spread, as well as its potential long-term consequences. These inequalities may take many forms. We highlight a number of them here as they relate to this journal's focus on community, work, and family.

Community

Vulnerable communities face significant risks in times of COVID-19. Communities with deeply entrenched poverty, overcrowded housing, and limited employment flexibility (e.g. communities where individuals are unable to work from home, miss a day of work, or face long and crowded commutes), face greater immediate risk of COVID-19. Other vulnerabilities, such as homelessness, disability, older age, or poor mental health, can increase the risks individuals face (The Lancet, 2020). Local services, oftentimes extensively scaled

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back following far-reaching decentralization efforts in many countries (Martinelli et al., 2017), have mostly come to a standstill. Without the support of these local resources, social inequalities within communities can increase. Such patterns arise in a wide range of societies throughout the world, including developing countries, notoriously unequal developed societies such as the United States, and even in more equal developed societies with encompassing welfare states, such as Sweden.

In England, for example, the government's response to the COVID-19 crisis presents a real and present threat to the rights and lives of disabled people. The passage of the emergency legislation, the Coronavirus Act on 25th March, 2020, has effectively broken the social contract between disabled people and successive governments that has been in place over the last thirty years. Disabled people's rights have been eroded by the Act which has, among others, suspended the Care Act 2014 reducing disabled people's rights to social care and made it easier for people to be detained under the Mental Health Act (MHA) 1983. At the same time, clinical guidance from the National Institute for Health and Social Care Excellence (NICE) raises questions about disabled people's entitlements to critical care resources. In the Global South, significant proportions of the population are homeless or living in overcrowded concentrations of shack dwellings, with high levels of poverty and food insecurity. People living here often lack basic services such as electricity or clean water (Graham & Mphaphuli, 2018). In these contexts, COVID-19 can spread more rapidly (The Lancet, 2020), and the impact will likely exacerbate already extreme social inequality (Graham, 2020).

There are also ways in which communities have come together in positive ways in times of COVID-19. In a rapidly changing context, community responses have been swift. In the Netherlands, for example, volunteer groups have formed to offer help to individuals unable to leave their homes, offering services such as grocery shopping. In England, disabled people, their families, and their allies – including academics – are coming together to crowdfund legislative challenges where necessary and are standing together to protect disabled people's liberties and lives. The emergence of visible community links, sometimes expressed as community located CovAid groups, emerges at the very time that prior dominant forms of transactional capitalism are less evident and less functional. This groundswell of volunteerism brought about by being on lockdown has enabled many people to engage or re-engage with local community, whilst maintaining online digital forms. How this shift towards positive participation will manifest itself in the future is up for debate.

Work

The full economic impact of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis has yet to be understood – and is possibly far ahead of us. Encompassing measures are undertaken to protect the economy, including temporary layoffs, temporary halts in the collection of income taxes and VAT, and government-guaranteed loans to entrepreneurs. Governments are continuing to pay wages in many countries, and in France, some companies have created their own compensation funds to cover up to 90% of employees' salaries. In some cases, such funds already existed; in other cases these funds have been developed through salary cuts to top management. Such measures are important, but unemployment will still likely rise markedly – early signals of which are already being reported at the time of this writing. Unemployment insurance benefits have the potential to act as an automatic

stabilizing force, maintaining incomes and economic activity in times of economic downturn (Dullien, 2013). It should, however, be noted that unemployment benefits have become less adequate in protecting incomes in a number of European countries, for instance because benefit levels were reduced or not updated for inflation, payment duration was shortened, or requirements regarding prior work or contribution history were raised.

A case study in Sweden showed that these reductions in unemployment benefits hardly increased the poverty risks of dual-earner couples (Alm et al., 2020). However, for single parents and singlepeople without children, and more generally those households whose income came from a single earner, the retrenchment of unemployment benefits rendered unemployment into exceedingly high risks for poverty. The alternative, social assistance benefits as a measure of last resort for people not qualifying for unemployment insurance, has seen declining levels over the last decades in European welfare states, and is seldom adequate to reach above commonly accepted income-poverty thresholds (Nelson, 2013).

How a spike in people losing their jobs will play out is unknown at the time of writing. Vigilance is called in particular for those in precarious employment, with temporary or zero hour contracts, women, entrepreneurs, or youths just about to enter the labor market. Unemployment insurance that provides adequate income replacement and is accessible to a large share of workers is particularly important for the economic wellbeing of singlepeople, single parents, and other families who have to rely on a single job income. In addition, such unemployment insurance can complement public support to enterprises that are aimed to keep up supply, by ensuring demand from families.

In the Global South, where unemployment is high and a significant proportion of work takes place in the informal sector, the impact is sure to be even greater. In India, 80% of work takes place in the informal sector (The Lancet, 2020). Informal work is often insecure and involves work that does not allow people to stay at home, which places families and children in these situations at even greater risk. In addition, in many countries of the Global South, unemployment is significantly higher than in the Global North. In South Africa, for example, unemployment is alarmingly high among young people, with more than 50% of young people without work (Graham et al., 2020). The ability of governments in Global South countries to address the far-reaching effects COVID-19 will have on employment in these contexts is unclear, although current projections suggest the extreme poverty rate among vulnerable households will triple without government intervention (Bassier et al., 2020).

Family

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced families to try to maintain work-family balance with few supports. With schools and daycare facilities closed, parents are solely responsible for childcare and perhaps even homeschooling. Yet, many parents are also working their paid jobs from home, while others have heightened financial concerns due to losing their job, and yet others involved in healthcare may be living away from their families to reduce exposing them to the virus. Whatever the circumstance, work-family balance has become increasingly challenging. There has been much discussion on how the pandemic will likely exacerbate gender inequalities, with women being forced to do

even more domestic labor given the circumstances (Ruppner et al., 2020). Yet, men increasingly say they want an egalitarian relationship and also to be more involved in their children's lives (Petts et al., 2018; Scarborough et al., 2019). With more men working from home, the pandemic presents a unique opportunity for men to step up, act on these attitudes, and share in the childcare and housework. In doing so, families who embrace the mantra of 'we're all in this together' may be best able to balance work and family life during this challenging time.

The closing of schools, and the reliance on homeschooling, is likely to elevate inequality of opportunity. Long holidays are known to be particularly detrimental to the school performance of children with a disadvantaged background (Campbell et al., 2015). The current situation is not a holiday – far from it – but we can learn from that research. It is particularly what children do, the stimuli they receive, during periods away from school that help them keep up or even improve their skills. Families differ in what they can offer, related to factors such as parental levels of education, poverty, physical and psychological health, overcrowding, the availability of computers and adequate internet access to participate in distance learning (which needs to be available to all children in a household), and parents speaking the language in which teaching takes place. Schools and early childhood education and care provide a more consistent learning experience to children of all backgrounds, sometimes offer meals, and monitor not only children's performance but also important aspects of their health and well-being (for more detail on this, see: Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Educational inequalities are even more pronounced in the Global South, where families with access to private schooling will be further advantaged compared to families reliant on public schooling, where the transition to technology-assisted learning is more difficult (Graham, 2020).

It should also be acknowledged that 'the family', or 'the home', is not always a safe space. Women who are victims of intimate partner violence often do not report this due to stigma (Kumar & Casey, 2020), but these women may now be locked in with their perpetrator. Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant* (De Zwaan, 2020) reports how a teacher was physically attacked (presumably by her partner) while she was video-conferencing with her class. This is just one poignant example of how violence and abuse continue. The Guardian (2020) reports a surge in domestic violence in relation to COVID-19 in the United States, and Secretary-General of the United Nations Guterres called on governments to put women's safety first as they respond to the pandemic. While governments urge citizens to remain in their homes to stay safe, we must be mindful of the problems that such orders create for those who are exposed to violence in their homes.

The intersection between family and measures taken against COVID-19 runs deep. Seemingly simple rules – that now have to be implemented on very short notice – can pose unexpected challenges, and how people are affected by these rules strongly depends on the composition of their family and the nature of their community. On March 23, supermarkets in the Netherlands imposed a rule to only allow a limited number of shoppers at the same time, and that customers were only allowed to enter the store unaccompanied. This rule caused major problems particularly for some single parents, as they had no one to look after their child (which, of course, was reinforced by the ongoing distancing policies and practices). Dutch interest organization *Single SuperMom* (footnote: <http://>

singlesupermom.nl) raised the alarm in a public letter to the Prime Minister: several instances were reported of single mothers being denied access to buy groceries. 'This cannot be the intention of the door policy, but it is a consequence', the letter reads (footnote: <https://joop.bnnvara.nl/opinies/je-kind-buiten-aan-de-lantaarnpaal-vastbinden>, last accessed March 30, 2020, translation from Dutch by the authors).

Not everyone has the social network to make alternative arrangements, not all supermarkets deliver to the home, and the financial vulnerability of this group also means that online shopping and asking someone else to do the shopping is not always possible.

Conclusion

In large parts of the world, including but certainly not limited to the Global South, seemingly simple measures to keep the spread of COVID-19 at bay, like keeping distance from other people and even washing hands with water and soap, are mere luxuries to many. Many people, such as healthcare workers (and other essential occupations) who give their all to save lives, people who are otherwise forced to go to work, those who live in slums, or those who previously found some form of refuge in camps such as Moria in Greece or Niatak in Iran, may simply not have the option to be safe. Similarly, those who can afford to have groceries or other goods delivered to their homes may be able to limit their exposure more effectively than those who are economically less fortunate. For communities, workers, and families who are safe in times of COVID-19, and have more resources, this is the time to show solidarity. Although the COVID-19 pandemic may likely exacerbate inequality, this is also an opportunity for all to come together as a global community to understand, respect, and help each other. As the Editorial Board of *Community, Work & Family*, we will do our part by continuing to post relevant research and other resources on our social media account, welcoming all research that helps us to understand the effect of COVID-19 on community, work, family, and its intersections, including informed editorials on these issues for our Voices column.

Disclosure statement

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