



From crisis to social transformation: Embracing a feminist human rights-based approach to preparedness

Rion McCall Magan* & Baiker, Manuela**

Abstract: COVID-19 provided a context to advocate for change in crisis response and recovery efforts. To ensure just and inclusive responses to future emergencies, it is crucial to retain this momentum by adopting a feminist human rights-based approach to preparedness, rather than feminised approaches followed in states such as Ireland and Germany.

As the world grappled with the crises presented by the onset of COVID-19 from 2020 onwards, some of the calls in response and recovery advocated more inclusive and innovative strategies, seeking equitable and socially transformative outcomes, at both international and national levels. As [stated](#) by Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary-General,

the pandemic has shown the devastating impacts of inequality within and between countries. Time and again, it is the most vulnerable and marginalised who suffer most when crises hit. It is time to prioritise investment in people; to build a new social contract, based on universal social protection; and to overhaul social support systems established in the aftermath of the Second World War.

* Rion McCall Magan is a Third Secretary (Junior Diplomat) in the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs. She holds a European Master's Degree in Human Rights and Democratisation (EMA). She was part of the Europe research group for the GC Global Classroom 2021.

** Manuela Baiker is a Trainee Lawyer (Rechtsreferendarin) in Germany. She holds a European Master's Degree in Human Rights and Democratisation ([EMA](#)). She was part of the Europe research group for the [GC Global Classroom 2021](#).

Such discourse indicates the intention to tackle the pandemic not purely 'as a maths problem with humans but a [narrative of relationships](#) that extend over time'. Such a perspective is different from the focus of [classical crisis management](#), which understands crises as an issue to be rationally dealt with in isolation, giving weight to the calculation of risks and subsequent measurable outcomes. Hence, the principal object of rationalist management is to protect and return to 'normal'. This results in pre-existing structural inequalities being neglected, as the quantifiable risks and outcomes are privileged. Such classical approaches are [critiqued](#) by feminist voices as they can leverage pre-existing hegemonies.

By asking how we can build back 'better', the narratives employed during COVID-19 moved beyond the calculative and narrow rationality of neo-liberalist approaches and sought to address the pre-existing structural hegemonies in place. Despite these efforts, the actual implementation of state policies did not wholly reflect this perspective but rather [neglected](#) the re-configuration of structural inequalities.

The relevance of feminist crisis management

[Feminist crisis management](#) offers an alternative perspective on appropriate crisis response and recovery. Grounded in ethics of care, it recognises the importance of caring for those who are typically neglected and prioritises their well-being in ethical considerations. In the context of COVID-19, such an approach prioritises the needs and experiences of those most affected in immediate response policies, while promoting long-term recovery by addressing the root causes of the crisis and its unequal impacts.

Here, academics have unpacked the conceptualisation of feminist crisis management by distinguishing between [feminised and feminist](#) responses. A feminised response [acknowledges](#) the need for 'a targeted policy response to women or a specific cohort of women'. However, it follows mainstream neoliberal discourse in that problems are framed in individualised and rational terms, rather than connecting issues and considering underlying relationships. As a result, feminised response policies are likely to reinforce gender stereotypes and fall short of seeking social transformation.

In contrast, a [feminist response](#) considers the role of power dynamics in shaping the outcomes of crises and seeks to transform the structural inequalities. Applied to COVID-19, feminist framing views the pandemic not just as a health crisis, but a complex web of interrelated issues requiring a comprehensive approach in response. While the pandemic illuminated and exacerbated many existing social, economic and political crises, it has also created new ones, for example through school closures, the disruption of global supply chains and the general economic downturn. By highlighting the interconnectedness of crises and seeking a comprehensive solution to address them, feminist framing aids in advancing an agenda for social transformation.

Examples of states' response and recovery policies following a feminised approach

In the [analysis](#) conducted by a research group from Europe on states' COVID-19 labour policy response packages, a pattern of feminisation can be observed, as

while certain targeted actions were implemented, they fell short of seeking social transformation.

For example, in the case of Ireland, the government's response [policies focused](#) on wage subsidisation, tax and payment deferrals, grants and direct cost support as well as lending facilities. One of the most subscribed to schemes was the [Temporary/Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme](#) (T/EWSS), which emphasised job retention, as the payment was conditional on employment being sustained. Payments, calculated at 85 percent of the employee's net pay with a maximum of 410 euros per week, were made through the revenue system to employers and then administered to their employees.

Though women made claims to the scheme and corresponding policies, such as the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, somewhat equally to their male counterparts, the responses failed to address [women's disproportionate reliance](#) upon them. Moreover, there were [access barriers](#) to the T/EWSS for those returning from maternity benefits. Following their return to work, women who had not received a wage top-up on their maternity benefit from their employers did not meet the T/EWSS criterion that employees be on the payroll on 29 February 2020.

Affected women were made unemployed as their employers were not in a position to pay their wage without the assistance of the T/EWSS. Though in May 2020, the Irish government responded to this shortcoming by lifting the barriers to access and implementing the provision implemented retrospectively, [11.500 women](#) ceased to receive their maternity benefit during that time, with others left with no payment nor continuity in the relationship with their employers. Hence, regardless of the government's subsequent targeted action, the lack of consideration for connected issues surrounding COVID-19 policies resulted in the discriminatory exclusion of women from the labour market and the neglect of the state's human rights obligations.

Similarly, the German government's initial labour policy response to COVID-19 aimed to preserve employment through the [short-time work scheme](#) (*Kurzarbeit*). While this policy was successful in safeguarding employment, including that of women, the general policy response showed gaps in protection for marginalised workers. For example, workers performing a 'Minijob', a form of marginal employment predominantly exercised by women, are exempt from social security obligations and, in turn, [did not qualify](#) for short-time work benefits or unemployment pay. This system has been [long criticised](#) for contributing to gender inequality prior to the pandemic as it traps women in part-time work with limited career prospects.

As Germany moves into recovery rather than capitalising upon the momentum brought on by the pandemic for social transformation, the government [expanded the Minijob](#) system in October 2022, resulting in the further perpetuation of the gender pay gap and the gender pension gap.

Albeit being only one example, the German case illuminates the missed opportunity to challenge the status quo to better prepare for future emergencies. The Minijob system significantly contributed to the unequal impacts of the pandemic and will continue to leave those in marginal employment less protected during future crises. Although some positive developments to achieve gender equality can be observed – such as the planned abolition of the contested [Ehegattensplitting](#) – a tax policy seen to perpetuate traditional gender

roles by providing a financial incentive for women to remain in low-paid work, or not to take up any work at all – it is still open whether these changes will be implemented. Importantly, feminist preparedness for future emergencies would require going further, proving the willingness to achieve true social transformation.

Though the discourse surrounding COVID-19 response and recovery reiterated the need to build back better, states' implemented policies can be seen to follow a feminised approach, reinforcing the status quo rather than transforming it. Not only do such responses fall short of seeking social transformation but they also work to reinforce the structures of gender power dynamics that led to the disproportionate protection gaps.

The need for a feminist human rights-based preparedness

As human rights provide universally defined standards for just and inclusive social transformation, through prioritising dignity for all individuals, they can provide the framework for feminist crisis management. Offering a platform for debate that encourages the wider involvement of civil society, with equal participation and the consideration of intersectional experiences, the human rights framework encourages working together to envision a re-imagined society. By incorporating a feminist human rights-based approach to crisis management and crisis preparedness, the perspective on mitigating crises changes – from trying to return to 'normal' to challenging structural inequalities and envisioning a transformed future. Only by incorporating an understanding of crises that highlights the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression throughout time, and prioritises the needs and perspectives of those who are typically neglected, cycles of crisis can be broken.