

# Gender and international development cooperation in times of Covid-19

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## Abstract

In this paper we seek to address the gender impact that the current health emergency caused by the global Covid-19 pandemic is bringing about. We will also tackle the differences between the countries of the North and the countries of the South in terms of their needs and interests in the face of the disease. We start by defining three prior concepts: Covid-19, gender and international cooperation; we then go on to identify the reasons why it is necessary to include the gender perspective in both subsequent analyses and in the decisions made during the emergency situation; we will then approach the groups that are also experiencing a particular impact during this time in order to later analyse the differences between the countries of the North and the countries of the South in terms of their needs and interests in tackling Covid-19 depending on their specific circumstances. Lastly, we will draw a series of conclusions from the analysis and the reflections made.

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**Keywords:** Covid-19, women, international cooperation, gender, capitalism.

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## Introduction

In recent years we have experienced an increasing proliferation of support for feminist perspectives that have positioned themselves in the public political agenda, albeit with considerable difficulties. Through extensive effort and their capacity to self-organise, feminist movements have achieved various advances in public policies. However, they are aware of the need for further progress.

The current health emergency, due to the emergence of the pandemic caused by Covid-19, perhaps poses one of the greatest obstacles that women have had to confront in recent times. Indeed, we could say that it will definitely be the greatest obstacle we have ever faced as a “world-system” (Grosfoguel, 2016, p. 153), but it also entails – and will entail – a very serious gender impact on a global scale, which we will try to address henceforth.

Accordingly, we will present three key concepts which this article will focus on: Covid-19, triggering the new global situation; the concept of gender, to determine at a later date the implications linked to it; and the concept of international cooperation. Subsequently, we will identify the reasons why it is considered essential to incorporate the gender perspective in terms of analyses and indeed with regard to the making of public policies for tackling the disease and the recovery of various systems. We will then include some brief thoughts on certain groups that are also being adversely affected, such as the elderly, children or those with functional diversity. Before concluding, we will examine the existing differences between the Global North and Global South in terms of their needs and interests facing this disease and their particular situation in the international context. We will complete this paper by drawing a series of conclusions with which we intend to continue to construct a discussion around the various aspects analysed.

## Introductory concepts: Covid-19, gender and international cooperation

Covid-19 was the name the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020) used to identify the new infectious disease caused by a coronavirus, a family of viruses that can cause illnesses in both animals and human beings. Its most common symptoms are fever, fatigue and a dry cough, although others should be added such as nasal congestion, runny nose, muscular and/or throat pain or diarrhoea, to which several more have been added more recently. The new disease was detected in December 2019 in the Wuhan area, China. It spread rapidly due to being highly contagious, particularly through those people who – although infected – were not experiencing any symptoms. The elderly suffer the greatest impact and mortality, particularly those over 80 years of age and especially those with previous pathologies.

It was not the first time something like this had happened. As indicated by Alonso (2003), in the year 2001 alone, 20% of all outbreaks of infectious diseases reported to the WHO were caused by unknown pathogens. Nevertheless, as stated by Alonso (2003), Castro et al. (2007) or Busquets (2011), the enormous level of current globalisation has accelerated transmission of Covid-19, something that our actions as human beings have contributed to as they have an impact on climate change, for instance: pollution, natural and forced movement of animals or even the provision of care.

The current situation demonstrates the importance of care systems where, historically, the main tasks have overwhelmingly fallen on, and continue to fall on, women (Grupo de Trabajo Cuidados y Género / *Care and Gender Working Group*, 2020). This fact has contributed to caring being considered as gendered work which, as indicated by Cortés et al. (2020), is visible and grants certain employment rights when it is paid work. However, when unpaid, this work becomes invisible and loses the few rights it held. Nevertheless, in personal and social settings these roles are retaining or acquiring even greater obligations, thus making it essential to incorporate the concept of gender in our analysis.

Gender constitutes a “social concept” (AC SUR-Las Segovias, 2006, p. 7) which seeks to show that roles associated with men and women are not determined by the person’s biological character – by their sex – but instead these roles vary according to cultural, social, economic, historical or political contexts. Gender inequalities are, therefore, a cultural product which stems from the transformation of sexual differences into inequalities themselves, related to economic, social, cultural, political or ethical aspects.

Therefore, gender relations are tools for the definition and social control of a particular system, defined in space and time, which assigns rights and responsibilities depending on whether identification is made with the male or female gender (AC SUR-Las Segovias, 2006). At present, this context is neoliberal, capitalist, imperialist and patriarchal globalism (Calvo, 2011), which seeks the dominance of male interests, especially those of rich, white, western and heterosexual men.

The fact that the concept of gender is a social construction and that in recent decades we have been immersed in a global capitalist system brings us to the third concept. Regarding international cooperation, as stated by Sotillo (2011), depending on the type of development envisaged, there will be a certain degree of cooperation, and there is no universal agreement for its definition as such. In any event, it could be argued that it would be a relationship between two or more countries seeking mutual benefits, although reality provides us with a high degree of unidirectionality, which has much to do with the emergency and the evolution of international cooperation since its inception. Broadly speaking, it is the Western countries that make decisions on, call for and feed into a system of cooperation designed by and for their economic and/or geopolitical interests.

Regarding infectious diseases, international cooperation has facilitated the definition, isolation and availability of preventive therapeutic and diagnostic measures that limit their spread. However, as stated by Barriga (2003, p. 370), “a solid structure for worldwide public health has yet to be put in place which involves all nations with their states and communities” insofar as no one is safe from emerging diseases. Also, these diseases “know no borders and their spread clearly derives from globalisation” (Busquets, 2011, p. 8).

## Gender perspective and the situation of women during the Covid-19 pandemic

Patriarchal capitalist globalisation obscures the importance of women in the world-system. Faced with this, including the gender perspective across the board in the design and implementation of every type of public policy is a core element for achieving an egalitarian world-system. This means rethinking the androcentric perspective (ACSUR-Las Segovias, 2006), changing the – seemingly innate – logic of sexual division of labour. It is precisely these conditions of sexual division of labour that makes it impossible to care well. In an interview by Dillon (2020), María Jesús Izquierdo, PhD in Economics and lecturer of Sociological Theory at the University of Barcelona, considers that the phenomena attributed to dependency remained in the home, in the private sphere. Likewise, a person is not considered to be a citizen in liberal democracies if it is not possible to be productive. Therefore, this sexual division of labour renders helpless those who need to be taken care of, or who require occasional support to provide self-care for themselves. This is a situation that all of us experience at some point in our lives since we are interdependent beings.

Inclusion of the gender perspective in any political decision-making is essential on the path to transforming the world-system and the different societies in which we live. In the pandemic we are enduring lies a crucial element to “understand the primary and secondary effects” (Wenham et al., 2020, p. 846) of the health emergency on individuals and communities. Only through analysis of the situation and making decisions with consideration for the gender perspective will steps be made towards the development of fair and equitable policies and interventions (Ramos, 2020; García, 2020).

It appears that “the inequalities suffered by women will only be of public interest when the patriarchy allows it to be” (Feminismos, 2020, p. 1). We did not learn our lesson from the last health crises and this is reflected by Smith (2019), who states that less than 1% of academic studies carried out *a posteriori* studied their gender impact. In the current crisis situation, the example of the health sector underlines some of these inequalities. This is a sector in which up to 70% of staff are women; professionals who are rendered invisible and silenced, because in the public arena there only appears to be space for the remaining 30% of the sector,

i.e., the men. We are, once again, witnessing the model that takes us back to “male doctors and female nurses” (Feminismos, 2020, p. 2).

Therefore, we have set out below a comparative table showing the practical needs and strategic interests of women according to whether they live in a Western or impoverishing country (Spain is used as a reference), or in an impoverished country,<sup>2</sup> a habitual recipient of international aid (Table 1). According to ACSUR-Las Segovias (2006), the practical needs are related to the current roles of women and men, and take place in daily life according to the functions relating to their specific role. Furthermore, the strategic interests are long-term in nature and seek an improvement in the living conditions and wellbeing of underprivileged people, such as women, to achieve transformation of society and the world-system.

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<sup>2</sup> We use the definitions of impoverishing countries and impoverished countries because according to Sotillo (2011, p. 23): “beyond definitions (...) are the connotations of who defines what and what is ultimately meant not just by a word, but also by a certain concept”.

**Table 1.** Needs and interests of women according to whether they live in impoverishing or impoverished countries

Impoverishing countries		Impoverished countries	
Needs	Interests	Needs	Interests
Continuation of work and/or income received, without reductions. Food and other family priorities. Psychological and physical safety (possibly living with abuser). Mental, sexual and reproductive health. Care for children and/or dependents and/or people sick with Covid-19. Covid-19 protective equipment. Social interaction with family and friends. Financial capacity (informal and/or insecure work). Menstrual hygiene products in personal protective equipment (PPE) for female workers. Involvement in Covid-19 coordination committees. Vaccine against Covid-19. Balancing of caring with work on the front line of risk (70% of healthcare workers, socio-sanitary workers, supermarket workers, etc.).	Inclusion of the gender perspective in Covid-19 coordination committees. Equal sharing of domestic work. Free psychosocial care. Special measures against male violence in lockdown. Social or community support programmes against situations of male violence in lockdown. Guaranteed income in the event of job loss or salary reduction. Sharing of domestic tasks and design of public measures to promote this / make it obligatory. Analysis from a gender perspective of the impact of Covid-19 in different areas. Mandatory 100% salary supplement for women in the event of ERTE (furlough). Prioritisation of reinstating women back into work in the event of ERTE. Non-sexist education. Guaranteed access and strengthening of specific services for women. Guaranteed access to PPE against Covid-19. Reinforcement of public services funding. Measures to promote real equality. Promotion of women's leadership. Development of economic mitigation strategies. Progress in ecofeminist policies. Implementation of policies that guarantee real reconciliation.	Food <i>stricto sensu</i> . Basic and specialised healthcare. Psychosocial care. Access to drinking water. Guaranteed income (up to 90% in the informal economy). Access to contraception. Physical and psychological safety (wars, religious fanaticism, etc.). Soap and hydroalcoholic solutions. Protective equipment against Covid-19. Decent spaces for physical isolation and lockdown. Access to basic technology and medication. Mental, sexual and reproductive health.	Access to basic services. Public education systems. Health systems and public health centres with prevention policies. Access to ownership of cultivated land. Systems for irrigation and water potability. Technological modernisation. Sustainable public exploitation of natural resources. Physical safety. Recognition of women as subjects of the law. Policies for the promotion of equal opportunities. Guarantee of basic food needs and promotion of food sovereignty. Waste management policy. Surmounting neo-colonialism and cancelling payment of debt. Recognition of religious freedom. Production for self-consumption before exportation. Reduction of inequality and promotion of employment rights. Capacity for political participation.

**Note.** Compiled by the author based on ACSUR-Las Segovias (2006), Butler (2020), Cúneo (2020), García (2020), Care and Gender Working Group (2020), Gutiérrez and Ordaz (2020), Martín (2019), Moreno and Ayala (2020), UN Women (2020), Prieto (2020), Ramos (2020), Roy (2020), Shick et al. (2019), Smith (2019), Sotillo (2011) and Wenham et al. (2020).

It should be noted that we have included in the table only some of the practical needs and strategic interests that we can identify in this situation. This does not suggest that these are the only options, as there may be many others, depending on the socio-economic or socio-cultural situation of a particular person. Likewise, if rather than using Spain as the basis for the analysis of impoverishing countries we instead take Germany, the United States or any other nation, we could include or remove different options. In any case, it serves as an example for what we intend to do in this paper, which is solely to draw attention to the many existing differences and inequalities according to which country is dealing with the arrival or outbreaks of Covid-19.

Furthermore, our Eurocentric position must be recognised. Although we are aware of it and try to be objective with our assessments, this defines our perceptions of reality and, consequently, we may be culturally biased when assessing different needs and interests.

Addressing practical needs has an impact on the improvement of living conditions, but not particularly on the social status of these people; in fact it is quite the opposite. In terms of women, in some cases addressing these needs can have the adverse effects of reinforcing traditional relationships between women and men. It is for this reason that paying attention to strategic interests must be the priority option in the medium and long term, as this will engender changes in the roles pre-assigned to women and men, thereby facilitating empowerment of the former (ACSUR-Las Segovias, 2006). The situation that we are experiencing is not solely limited to a health issue; we are also dealing with the prevailing gender inequality, in a situation that is even more critical than normal (UN Women, 2020).

In addition, it is necessary to highlight the major differences that exist between impoverishing and impoverished countries. Among the aspects that have been identified, we can highlight two paradoxical examples of global inequality: access to personal protective equipment against Covid-19 and psychosocial care.

On the one hand, in impoverishing countries we consider guaranteed access to the aforementioned PPE to be a strategic interest, since – albeit with some difficulties due to the exponential increase in global demand – stocks are available and expected to be distributed according to socio-sanitary criteria. Whereas, in impoverished countries, we consider it to be a practical necessity, because the reality is that many of them do not even have the opportunity of accessing such equipment, or not in the desired quantity or quality. Furthermore, there are countries that do not have health centres with adequate equipment and staff to face a pandemic such as Covid-19. An example of this is provided to us by Roy (2020) with the statement that between 30 January, the date the first Covid-19 infection was detected in India, and 22 March, the day the curfew was decreed in the country, the Indian government permitted and even favoured exportation of protective equipment and respirators to impoverishing countries instead of caring for and protecting its own population. An example, therefore, of the consequences of capitalism which creates a

situation whereby some countries have to first respond to the production demanded by whoever holds the economic power, rather than dedicating their initial efforts to self-sufficient production.

Moreover, we identified psychosocial care to be a practical necessity for women in impoverished countries at the same time as it being free of charge appears as a strategic interest to impoverishing countries. The difference lies in the existence of reasonably continuous care provision in the latter, whereas in the former it may not exist at all at present or be reliant on international cooperation projects in some cases.

By observing Table 1 as a whole, the major inequalities according to place of residence can be observed, including from a gender perspective and taking into account, as we have previously mentioned, that not all existing possibilities are covered. The gender perspective is already established in the sphere of international development cooperation. This is stated by Carballo (2011), who also explains the latest of the developments originating from the fringes, which is empowerment as a power-generating tool to enact the required change in power relationships and the structure that supports them.

## Other situations: the elderly, children, functional diversity, migrants

Butler (2020) claims that declaring the home to be a space of protection is somewhat figurative. This is because many people do not have such a space, due to not having a home per se. In this situation, the appearance of Covid-19 meant a cost-benefit decision for some governments and, accordingly, some people would live and others would inevitably die. According to the author, the “human community is equally precarious” (p. 2) and to a certain degree this is what this infectious disease has come to show us, bridging the great divide between the previously mentioned inequalities.

Therefore, to move forward, it is necessary to roughly define the circumstances of traditionally more vulnerable groups who have also been suffering far-reaching consequences throughout this pandemic. For this purpose, we have presented below the practical needs and strategic interests of: the elderly, people with functional diversity, migrants and children (Table 2). As in the previous table, we differentiate between the possible needs and interests according to where these groups live, either in impoverished or impoverishing countries.



**Table 2.** Needs and interests of elderly people, people with functional diversity, migrants and children depending on whether they live in impoverishing or impoverished countries

	Impoverishing countries		Impoverished countries	
	Needs	Interests	Needs	Interests
Elderly people	Food and access to Covid-19 protection products. Specialised health care. Mental and sexual health. Social relations in lockdown. Financial capacity (pensions below the poverty line).	Respect for their rights on equal terms. Person-centred care in the socio-health field. Sharing of care tasks (grandmother carers). Programmes to detect and monitor loneliness. Reinforcement of public services for the elderly. Psychosocial care. Strengthening of social support networks. Reformulation of the care policy for dependent individuals. Guaranteed financing of the pension system. Improvement of pension amounts.	Food and access to drinking water. Basic and specialised psychosocial and health care. Guaranteed income. Physical safety. Soap and hydroalcoholic solutions and protective equipment against Covid-19. Mental and sexual health. Spaces for physical isolation and lockdown. Basic medicines.	Access to basic services. Public healthcare systems, healthcare centres and education systems. Surmounting neo-colonialism and cancelling payment of debt. Guarantee of basic food necessities. Recognition of religious freedom. Production for self-consumption before exportation. Capacity for political participation.
People with functional diversity	Food and access to adapted Covid-19 protection products. Mental and sexual health. Specialised health care. Personal assistance. Care staff. Financial capacity.	Elimination of physical, mental and communication barriers. Respect for their rights on equal terms. Promotion of universal personal assistance. Enactment of an independent living law. Promotion of access to regular work. Acceptance, as a minimum, of the minimum wage as a basic salary for protected work. Redesign of the education system to make it truly inclusive.	Food and access to drinking water. Basic and specialised psychosocial and health care. Guaranteed income. Physical safety. Soap and hydroalcoholic solutions and protective equipment against Covid-19. Mental and sexual health. Spaces for physical isolation and lockdown. Basic medicines. Access to technical support.	Access to basic services. Public healthcare systems, healthcare centres and education systems. Surmounting neo-colonialism and cancelling payment of debt. Guarantee of basic food necessities. Recognition of religious freedom. Recognition of disability as a differentiating factor in the search for equality. Production for self-consumption before exportation. Capacity for political and social participation. Free and adapted public transport.

	Impoverishing countries		Impoverished countries	
	Needs	Interests	Needs	Interests
Migrants	Food and access to adapted Covid-19 protection products. Mental and sexual health. Guaranteed income and/or employment protection (mostly informal). Spaces for physical isolation and lockdown. Work and residency permits. Relations with family and friends from the country of origin. Access to financial help and benefits (without a bank account, etc.).	Peace education and multicultural programmes. Regularisation of personal status. Resolution of conflicts in home countries. Promotion of peer-to-peer cooperation with countries of origin. Expediting accreditation of their studies. Family reunification policies. Campaigns to raise awareness of prejudice and promotion of tolerance and coexistence. Specific care programmes for migrants according to specific problems.	Physical safety. Food and other basic necessities. Drinking water and hygiene products. Access to water for food production. Guaranteed income. Freedom of movement, residence and work.	Measures against rejection and panic regarding migrants. Policies to fight against racism. Reversal of anti-migration policies, which have worsened due to Covid-19. Respect for human rights and international treaties. Combating physical and armed violence. Elimination of segregation. Reduction of rich-poor and North-South inequalities. Strengthening of food sovereignty at the point of origin.
Children	Food (closure of canteens). Adapted Covid-19 protection products. Mental health and physical activity. Increased risk of abuse, domestic violence and/or cyber-bullying.	Reform and updating of the education system. Long-term education agreements to include peace education and non-sexist, emotional and multicultural education. Reinforcement and dissemination of childcare services. Policies against cyber-bullying and abuse.	Food and access to other basic elements for daily life. Drinking water and personal hygiene products. Guaranteed personal development. Education against child labour.	Reduction of rich-poor and North-South inequalities. Public education systems with guaranteed access through student grants and/or cost-free for the most disadvantaged families. Free public transport. Progress in decolonisation processes.

**Note.** Compiled by the author based on ACSUR-Las Segovias (2006), Alconchel (2020), Cúneo (2020), Deiros (2020), Garralda (2020), Care and Gender Working Group (2020), Gutiérrez and Ordaz (2020), López (2020), Martínez (2020), Moreno and Ayala (2020), Pradilla (2020), Shick et al. (2019), Simón (2020) and Sotillo (2011).

There are certainly many other practical needs and strategic interests for the different groups listed in the table. The common bond shared by all of them can be identified in the effects of capitalism and colonialism, which remains in the form of neo-colonialism in a significant number of countries where inequalities are increasing. The first causes, among other consequences, regression of social rights, salaries, employment security and wellbeing resources (Petras, 2011). The second, meanwhile, originates and draws its impetus from economics, having established the exploitation of mankind by mankind as a vehicle for the modern world (Verdesio, 2018). Colonialism has been the doctrine upon which the West has cultivated its worldwide political and economic domination, and it continues today in the form of neo-colonialism which favours the retention of control but through more subtle and indirect channels.

There are examples such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, where poorer people eat little and walk far to save public transport costs in the capital (Deiros, 2020). This situation is a result of the urban and territorial organisation of the country carried out by Belgium during the colonial era. Various circumstances such as the aforementioned span the world – from north to south and east to west – with their own particular nuances and differences. However, they share a common denominator: neo-colonial and patriarchal capitalist globalisation, which creates and amplifies economic and social inequalities.

Another example is the case of Gaza, which is suffering an enforced and long-drawn-out confinement, as summarised by Garralda (2020), with a collapsed public health system which, due to years of international blockade, lacks the necessary resources to attend to the most basic of needs. Equally, situations of inequality extend across all those countries currently immersed in migration processes, as this is not a good time to set off towards the North (Pradilla, 2020).

## An analysis of Covid-19 in terms of the North-South axis

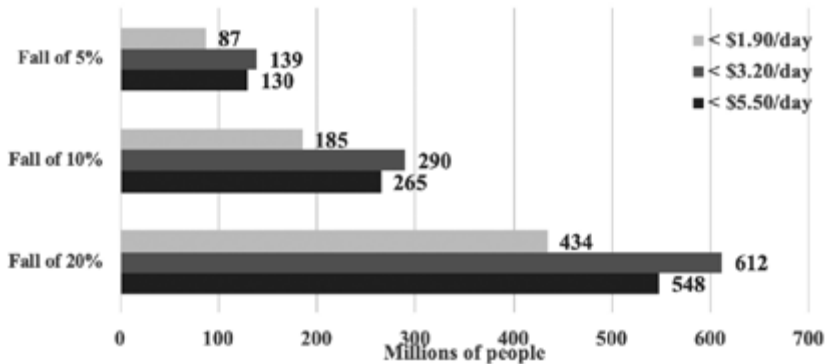
In light of the identification of needs and interests carried out in the previous tables, it is necessary to indicate, as done by Shick et al. (2019), the need to introduce an aspect of intersectionality between the different forms of oppression of the dominant patriarchal system. This aspect is necessary because gender has come to be understood as a universal category, present in every type of oppression, when it does not actually take into consideration the situation of other people who do not conform to the model of a “western, white, heterosexual and middle-class woman” (Hernández, 2018, p. 281). It is therefore important to incorporate in the analysis the many types of discrimination that can be faced, because this intersectionality will enable us to assess and draw attention to each of these oppressions.

What is more, the spread of this infectious disease has generated a wave of “dormant ideological viruses” (Žižek, 2020, p. 1), from fake news to conspiracy theories or a significant increase in racism. Moreover, inequalities increase greatly in crisis situations such as the present one (Feminismos, 2020).

The addition of the global impact of Covid-19 to the development of globalisation further aggravates these inequalities and has a large bearing on the continuation of neo-colonial structures and rationales. Globalisation signifies the radicalisation of capitalism and the exacerbation of its effects, thus demonstrating that the pandemic we are suffering is a symptom of the necessary change (Barriga, 2003). This is a wake-up call in the quest for reorganisation of a global economy which is no longer dependent on the markets (Žižek, 2020) and which ceases to be guided by the western standards of impoverishing countries (Sotillo, 2011).

Covid-19 entails entering a period of uncertainty regarding its impacts in terms of its depth and duration. This fact predisposes the most vulnerable populations and groups to a much more critical situation than the one they have been in until now (Gutiérrez and Ordaz, 2020). The authors, analysing the data collected by the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER), identify three possible scenarios regarding the contraction of revenues or per capita consumption, depending on the contraction being: up to 20%, 10% or 5%. The study takes into account absolute poverty data according to the World Bank: living with less than \$5.50 a day, less than \$3.20 a day or less than \$1.90 a day. Below we can observe the probable increase in people living below the poverty line according to this analysis (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Projected millions of people living below the poverty line according to each scenario



Source: adapted from Gutiérrez and Ordaz (2020).

According to these possible projections, global contraction could occur which would lead to a very significant increase in the volume of people living below the poverty line. We have not been in this situation since the 1990s, when a continuous and steady reduction of the indicator commenced (Gutiérrez and Ordaz, 2020). As the figure itself shows, in the most benevolent scenario we are looking at a cumulative global increase of more than 350 million people below the poverty line for the total of the 3 daily quantities stipulated. Meanwhile, in the worst of the projected scenarios, the cumulative global volume would be almost 1.6 billion more people living below the poverty line. Furthermore, we should add to this data the people who are currently in this vulnerable situation and would see a further deterioration of their living conditions. Perhaps the moment has come for a real commitment to other types of policies to combat poverty, among which universal basic income is a very interesting option to consider.

As we have ascertained in Tables 1 and 2, there are large differences between the practical needs of countries in the North and South. Although these tables are created from the rationale of impoverishing countries vis-à-vis impoverished countries, internal and global logics show divergent characteristics between the North and South, which resemble in many cases the differences between impoverishing and impoverished countries. Aware of this, Shick et al. (2019, p. 185) advocate looking “towards the South and from the South”.

This proposal links with the South-South cooperation which is gathering momentum. It is one of the most horizontal and respectful forms of international cooperation between the different target populations and their respective systems of governance. For Ayllón (2011) this cooperation is characterised as being a phenomenon with two interrelated dimensions: a political dimension seeking bilateral alliances and support with which to acquire greater negotiating weight on an international level; and a technical dimension whereby two or more impoverished countries acquire individual or collective capabilities via cooperation in knowledge, resources and technology.

The South-South international cooperation could provide greater capability to certain countries in the face of impoverishing countries, so that they do not have to accept being part of the capitalist wheel that plagues them. This wheel revolves around the plundering of natural resources, mainly from the former African colonies, with the obligation to sell their natural resources to large multinational companies for next to nothing. This creates a significant ecological impact (ultimately resulting in the appearance and spread of epidemics) and social impact (Alonso, 2003). The wheel continues turning with the sale, through multi-million contracts, of western technology (which soon becomes obsolete in comparison with technology used in the North).

Right in the middle – and like another spoke in the wheel – are the various international cooperation projects and programmes, to which the impoverishing countries allocate a residual amount of the capital gains they obtain at their expense. These projects are in many cases loans to impoverished countries, which will be liable for the corresponding agreed interest, subsequently increasing their foreign debt. As a result, as stated by Grosfoguel for TeleSUR (2020a), these countries have to allocate their income to payment of this interest and then, with what remains, meet the needs and basic services of their population.

Geopolitics is not only limited to impoverishing versus impoverished countries. Among the first group, there are equally considerable differences between central and peripheral countries or between the North and South. This was presented at the time by Rodríguez-Pose and Petrakos (2004), whose analysis of the European Union member states identified a trend that highlighted the major structural inequalities of the Union itself. There can be no doubt that the crisis brought about by Covid-19 has impacted on these divergences, and reflections have emerged with greater

intensity around a potential break-up of the European Union in light of the unsupportive positions of the Northern countries.

The exit from the crisis brought about by Covid-19 is being linked to the concept of a new normality. It concerns a concept with its origins, once again, in the West, and it has been established in the international political discourse and narrative with barely any discussion or prior analysis. It is of particular relevance in those countries which have been taking, and continue to take, measures to restrict movement and also lockdown the population. With the intention of providing greater public safety in the face of possible contagion, practices are backed such as: greater social control, loss of rights and erosion of liberties, forms of relationships or expression. Furthermore, some of these practices appear to be leading to the creation of a new paradigm for our daily lives.

In light of this possibility, there are those who stand up for the need to reconsider and establish a new social contract that would include, among other elements, environmental aspects (CLACSO TV, 2020).

Perhaps this might be the moment where the organisations and institutions that have been dictating to us the rules of the game and international rules and regulations since the mid-20th century (Sotillo, 2011) begin to lose a certain weight and relevance. In addition, it is very likely that the global power structures and economic models will be restructured. In the words of Grosfoguel, gathered by TeleSUR (2020b):

Since the end of the Second World War, this is the first time that the United States is losing its global hegemony to China. The former is entering a great depression to which it has allocated a trillion dollars seeking reactivation of the market without results, whereas China has nationalised all of its internal production to overcome the crisis derived from Covid-19.

In light of this circumstance, it should be borne in mind that social work has historically been linked to the provision of support, which ties the discipline to international development and cooperation (Morales and Vieitez, 2004). For this reason, it is important to highlight that social work, among other disciplines, has a responsibility to generate and propose strategies of adjustment, change and transformation, from professional action and practice to the field of public policy (Juliao, 2012).

## Conclusions

In relation to women, Covid-19 demonstrates to us that when lives are in danger capitalism is not sustainable, especially when women fall sick. Women are constantly on the front line of care provision, meaning the system collapses when women fall sick (Quiroga, 2020). This is because the system rests on the shoulders of women, “we are trained to save ourselves. Life has taught us this time and time again” (Feminismos, 2020, p. 3).

Throughout the comparative analysis the existing inequality has been established between the practical needs and strategic interests of

women and certain groups in vulnerable situations. In turn, the internal comparison has been established between women and, within these groups, in terms of whether their place of residence was in an impoverishing or impoverished country. The analysis can be extrapolated generically to the North-South comparative, although there may be multiple realities that would need to be explored step by step.

Furthermore, the need for radical and permanent change in the politico-social sphere becomes apparent, the objective being to contribute to accelerating the fight for gender equality (Ramos, 2020) as the sole path towards transformation of societies and the world-system, gaining a greater level of social justice. Attending to the inequalities of groups in more disadvantaged or vulnerable situations involves protecting and strengthening their rights and, moreover, it is a must in order to reach this greater social justice.

Covid-19 stopped the engine of the capitalist system but it did not succeed in stopping the patriarchy. Nevertheless, we have the opportunity to evaluate and decide if we agree on whether to fix the engine or whether it is better to think about using an alternative. We have been offered the possibility of rethinking the end-of-the-world machine with which we have endowed ourselves, because “nothing could be worse than a return to normality” (Roy, 2020, p. 8). Therefore, although it may be a complex task, it is essential to analyse the beneficial effects of this situation. In this respect, we are given the opportunity to devise and construct an alternative society that reaches beyond the nation states, such as an agreement or a new social contract (CLACSO TV, 2020) of global solidarity and cooperation, finding alternative paths for mobilisation (Žižek, 2020).

Some aspects, such as the South-South cooperation, restructuring of power and decision structures, and the conscious and resolute inclusion of gender approaches and feminist analyses are essential. These elements constitute, at the very least, a part of the arguments to be used to challenge rentier capitalism, which seeks higher profits for owners of physical, financial and intellectual property, while the majority of the population lives, or scrapes out a living, in structural economic insecurity (Standing, 2020).

Patriarchal capitalist globalisation seeks to “impose a narrative where responsibility for the collapse lies not with the system itself, but rather with another series of lesser contingencies” (Žižek, 2012, p. 11). Covid-19 is most certainly not a minor issue at present, although as stated by Standing (2020) the designer of the capitalist system cannot be allowed to blame the virus for causing the economic crisis.

Similarly, and to conclude, we share the reflection by Batthyány (CLACSO TV, 2020) in his discussion with the sociologist, writer and lecturer Saskia Sassen, in which they explore the relevance of social sciences on these types of events, both in terms of prevention and decision-making to deal with them and mitigation of the emergency and the subsequent exit from the crisis. It is incomprehensible that there are committees of professionals which lack the presence of various social science disciplines such as social work, psychology or teaching, among others. Projections,



curves and vaccines are essential in a health crisis, but to ensure a suitable response they do not suffice by themselves. Thus, participation of these other disciplines is also essential. It sometimes seems like they are akin to the South of sciences, and are subsumed by what the North wants from them. Mitigation of the effects resulting from Covid-19 and the preservation and improvement of quality of life and social wellbeing depend on social constraints being properly addressed.

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