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Fellows and the Master's Thesis Corner

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## Feminist International Relations Theory and the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Globally, women are experiencing a different pandemic than men. Although Covid-19 continues to have a significant impact on global economies, women around the world are disproportionately affected, as they are being displaced from the workplace and pushed into poverty. Feminist International Relations theory encapsulates this global phenomenon as it places women at the center of analysis and prioritizes the female experience in international relations. As the pandemic persists, the economic disparity between men and women will continue to widen, heightening global gender inequality.

Feminist International Relations theory challenges the androcentric, patriarchal values of international relations theories. This male-dominated study does not consider gender as an influential factor and it largely ignores the female experience. Meaning, women's marginalized social status, lack of decision-making power, and collective identity are neglected from traditional IR theories and the study as a whole. Early feminist theorists sought to reform the study by recognizing womenkind as an influential factor in international relations. Feminist IR theory deconstructs prevailing gender norms and patriarchal values while recognizing the impact that women have in the international community. By considering gendered power dynamics, heteronormative, patriarchal norms, and institutionalized gender inequalities, this discipline makes women visible in a traditionally gender-blind field. This theory is key in analyzing the global gender economic inequalities that are a result of the pandemic.

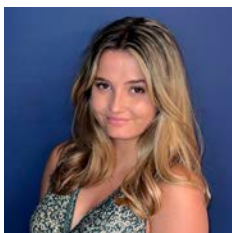
Before the pandemic, women were already disadvantaged economically. In the years leading up to 2019, the start of Covid-19, women comprised the majority of the world's poor, earning less than men and having limited access to economic opportunities such as career-oriented, decent work. Covid-19 exacerbated these inequalities further. According to Madgavkar, Anu, et al, "[W]omen's jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable to this crisis than men's jobs. Women make up 39 percent of global employment but account for 54 percent of overall job losses."<sup>1</sup>

This stark disparity is attributed to two main causes. First, according to the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, women are more likely to work in the informal economy which is comprised of jobs that are not protected or regulated by the state. These insecure positions do not offer paid leave, contracts, or flexibility in working from home. This sector was significantly affected by the pandemic. For example, according to the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, "[W]omen make up 80% of domestic workers, and 72% of domestic workers have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic."<sup>2</sup>

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1 Anu Madgavkar, Olivia White, Mekala Krishnan, Deepa Mahajan, and Xavier Azcue, "Covid-19 and Gender Equality: Countering the Regressive Effects," McKinsey & Company, April 10, 2021, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/covid-19-and-gender-equality-countering-the-regressive-effects>.

2 "Covid-19 Brief: Impact on Women and Girls," U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, August 31, 2021, <https://www.usglc.org/coronavirus/women-and-girls/>.



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Additionally, according to UN Women, women comprise the majority of single-parent households and also are more likely to be responsible for unpaid childcare and domestic work (UN Women 2021).<sup>3</sup> Women were majorly burdened with childcare and domestic work during the pandemic, resulting in them leaving work to fulfill these gendered duties. According to Bloomberg Equality, “Globally, women took on 173 additional hours of unpaid childcare last year, compared to 59 additional hours for men.”<sup>4</sup> These disparities, however, are only heightened for minority groups. For example, according to the Bloomberg Equality report, Pakistani women

*“Women did three times as much childcare as men during the pandemic, with the result that their careers and jobs were disproportionately sacrificed.”*

spent 390 hours in unpaid childcare during the pandemic while men spent only 36 hours in childcare.<sup>5</sup> As women did three times as much childcare as men during the pandemic globally, their careers and jobs were disproportionately sacrificed, which contributed to the gender economic equality gap.

While women are disproportionately hindered socially and economically by the pandemic, the global economy as a whole also suffers. According to a report by McKinsey & Company, “Global GDP growth could be \$1 trillion lower in 2030 than it would be if women’s unemployment simply tracked that of men in each sector.”<sup>6</sup> If the pandemic would have affected men and women in their work equally, the global

economy would be considerably better off. The economic impact could be much more severe than this estimate, however. Modeled factors such as childcare burdens, social bias, social spending, and recovery rate could vary dramatically. Conversely, if there were to be global reform regarding gender economic activity as it relates to the pandemic, an additional \$13 trillion could be added to the global GDP by 2030 according to the same report.

Feminist International Relations theory can elucidate this crippling global dilemma. According to feminist theory, state-structured hierarchies exist in which masculine institutions are prioritized over feminine institutions. For example, as women are likely to work in the informal labor market such as domestic care, states neglect this sector while prioritizing male-dominated domains such as the military and STEM. Additionally, feminist IR theory challenges moral considerations in the discipline. While realists believe that morality is not an influential factor in international relations, feminist theorists claim that morality is a vital consideration. According to E-International Relations, “[Issues of morality are] adopted by many feminists and gender theorists who try to challenge the emotional-rational binary, which they see as

3 “Covid-19 and Its Economic Toll on Women: The Story behind the Numbers.” UN Women, 2021, [https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/9/feature-covid-19-economic-impacts-on-women?gclid=Cj0KCQiA2NaNBhDvARIsAEw55hgD4rjp6Q5tAc98zkz9izCNK2cw\\_\\_hg27SmWpXxGsfX1pZ-mi2sNAkaAk\\_1EALw\\_wcB](https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/9/feature-covid-19-economic-impacts-on-women?gclid=Cj0KCQiA2NaNBhDvARIsAEw55hgD4rjp6Q5tAc98zkz9izCNK2cw__hg27SmWpXxGsfX1pZ-mi2sNAkaAk_1EALw_wcB).

4 Shera Avi-Yonah, “Women Did Three Times as Much Child Care as Men During Pandemic,” Bloomberg.com, June 25, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-06-25/women-did-three-times-as-much-unpaid-child-care-as-men-during-covid-pandemic>.

5 Shera Avi-Yonah, “Women Did Three Times as Much Child Care as Men During Pandemic,” Bloomberg.com, June 25, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-06-25/women-did-three-times-as-much-unpaid-child-care-as-men-during-covid-pandemic>.

6 Anu Madgavkar, Olivia White, Mekala Krishnan, Deepa Mahajan, and Xavier Azcue, “Covid-19 and Gender Equality: Countering the Regressive Effects,” McKinsey & Company, April 10, 2021, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/covid-19-and-gender-equality-countering-the-regressive-effects>.

corresponding to the female-male dichotomy.”<sup>7</sup> Meaning, feminists regard morality and ethics as contributing factors to IR theory in an effort to challenge traditional male-dominated theories such as realism. In considering morality, feminist theorists can question the social standards and justice regarding the global gender economic equality gap exacerbated by the pandemic. For example, there is no rational or quantifiable explanation as to why women are expected to be primary caregivers during the pandemic. Because women are socially perceived as domestic in nature due to antiquated gender norms and patriarchal standards, this issue can be challenged and explained by incorporating morality.

As the pandemic continues, women around the world disproportionately suffer economic setbacks. In confronting gender norms and institutionalized social inequalities, however, feminist IR theory provides an explanation for this global phenomenon.

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7 Lilly Felk, “The Call for a New Subject: Gender and the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *E-International Relations*, June 19 2020, <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/06/11/the-call-for-a-new-subject-gender-and-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.