

FEMINIST IDEAS FOR A
POST-COVID-19 WORLD

Pathways to Building Back Better: Advancing Feminist Policies in COVID-19 Response and Recovery

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FEMINIST ADVOCACY IN COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

On 14 April 2020—only about five weeks after the novel COVID-19 virus ground the world to a halt—the Hawai'i State Commission on the Status of Women released a recovery plan with a vivid opening line: “The road to economic recovery should not be across women’s backs”.²

This official document marked a critical moment in feminist organizing: Its feminist authors painted the consequences of gender inequality plainly, stating clearly they would not accept any pandemic recovery plan that continued to marginalize women.

The Commission outlined a feminist COVID-19 recovery. The gendered costs of the public shutdowns—such as increased domestic violence and greater domestic and childcare burdens for women—had been well documented by this point, but Hawaiian feminists suggested more than simply reverting back to the pre-pandemic status quo. Instead, they advocated rebuilding systems of economic exchange and social and environmental protection on the basis of valuing unpaid labour and attaining justice for marginalized groups.

Their approach builds on international norms that all policymaking—including that in response to COVID-19—must include a gendered perspective. This perspective asks that policymakers consider differential impacts on women and men and touches all policy areas, from childcare gaps, which have accelerated the pandemic’s adverse impact on women’s labour force participation, to worker protection, given that personal protective equipment (PPE) is not manufactured to fit women’s bodies.³ A feminist perspective goes further, asking not just how gendered inequities can be addressed but how systems can be redesigned to eliminate these gendered inequities in the first place. Hence, the US President’s economic plan calls for universal preschool, and industry organizations are advocating inclusive

design standards for PPE.⁴ In its entirety, the feminist vision of ‘building back better’ means centring equity, avoiding austerity cuts that affect women and other marginalized populations, boosting social protection and social infrastructure spending and ending exploitative labour market practices.

Feminist plans offer new templates for action and new visions for the future. They are serving as key advocacy tools, shaping governments’ COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery. They have been written by civil society organizations or by such organizations in partnership with policymakers in the legislative and/or executive branches. Once articulated, feminist plans need to be formally adopted, implemented, assessed and even adjusted in response to real-time developments. Each step requires political will.

This contribution to the ‘Feminist Ideas’ series offers reflections on how feminist advocates have strived to make COVID-19 response and recovery more transformative. First, the note highlights one key factor present in writing, adopting and implementing feminist plans—the existence of state-society policy networks—and examines linkages among feminist advocates in three cases—Argentina, Canada and Hawai'i. Second, the note highlights three ways feminist plans work to bring about change: by supporting feminist advocacy, by reorienting priorities and by providing language that helps advocates resist the watering down of transformative goals.⁵

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WHERE HAVE FEMINIST PLANS TAKEN HOLD?

No one-size-fits-all model for feminist COVID-19 recovery plans exists (nor can this short paper offer a comprehensive list of all initiatives), but key is the collaborative work among feminists and women's rights advocates within and across the state and society. In some countries and territories, feminist actors have proposed transversal plans, meaning plans that reach across policy sectors. Multi-sector plans written by civil society activists and organizations include those proposed by the Women's Policy Group in Northern Ireland, Engender and Close the Gap in Scotland and African Feminism, as well as the Hawaiian and Canadian plans discussed below.⁶ Elsewhere, legislators have played leadership roles, as with the Gender and COVID-19 Roundtable organized by three Chilean congresswoman (including the woman president of the Senate), which counts on participation from over 30 civil society organizations and meets semi-regularly to develop and deliver proposals.⁷

In other places, feminist planning has centred on budgets, with women's groups offering critiques of their governments' emergency funds or national budgets. In Austria, for example, *Femme Fiscale* pushed against Austria's emergency outlay, arguing the funds did not adequately meet women's needs and proposing their own Feminist Stimulus Package entitled "More for Care."⁸ In the United Kingdom, the Women's Budget Group criticized the Spring 2021 budget for austerity cuts that weakened rather than strengthened vital public services.⁹ The National Foundation of Australian Women applied a gender lens to the 2021 budget and lamented the priority placed on investing in male-dominated industries (such as construction) when most job losses and pay inequities have occurred in feminized sectors (such as retail and teaching).¹⁰ In this context, Argentina stands out for taking an explicitly feminist approach to budgeting, an initiative not

framed as pandemic-specific but that nonetheless addresses the same structural inequities that feminist recovery plans seek to undo.

Hawai'i: Vulnerability and opportunity

That Hawai'i led the globe in developing the template for a feminist COVID-19 recovery is perhaps no accident. An island archipelago far from the US mainland, Hawai'i is familiar with vulnerability and precarity: The state has a large multi-ethnic and Indigenous population with high social needs, and legacies of colonial and military exploitation have marginalized Indigenous peoples, languages and culture. Hawai'i relies on tourism, which itself depends on the underpaid labour of women, including Native women, and is vulnerable to environmental disasters and climate change. These issues are not new, but COVID-19 presented a new opportunity. Early in the pandemic, the Governor's office asked all executive agencies to advise on spending priorities, and the Hawaiian State Commission on the Status of Women seized the opportunity.

The Commission wrote the plan using an inclusive process. Its leaders leveraged their strong ties with grassroots groups, including Native organizations and organizations within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA+) community. Groups such as AF3IRM—founded in 2016 and described as a "completely unfunded, unstaffed transnational feminist organization supporting Native, Black, and immigrant women's leadership across sectors"—played key roles in shaping the plan's transformative aims.¹¹ Their priorities included a universal guaranteed income, programs to increase women's employment in green jobs and investments in childcare, maternal care and eldercare, all of which appeared in the final plan.¹²

The plan also made an economic case for public health restrictions, as opposed to a rapid reopening on the grounds of stimulating the economy. Challenging arguments that tough public health measures would have negative long-term economic effects, the plan cited research on the 1918 flu pandemic showing that cities proceeding more cautiously vis-à-vis reopening grew the same or perhaps faster than cities that reopened rapidly.¹³ The Hawaiian plan thus sought to prevent narratives that would place public health and economic growth in opposition.

Canada: Policy networks with access to high-level decision-makers

Following Hawai'i, the first national feminist economic recovery plan appeared in Canada. Many of the ideas related to building back better were flagged early in the pandemic, as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's experts advised him—as early as April 2020—that economic recovery included addressing what they called the “she-cession”, meaning an economic recession shaped largely by women's exit from the labour force. Addressing the ‘she-cession’, they told Trudeau, depended on measures such as funding childcare.¹⁴ In July 2020, academics Carmina Ravanera and Anjum Sultan, along with strategic leads Sarah Kaplan and Maya Roy, wrote a feminist COVID-19 recovery plan in a collaboration between the Canadian YWCA and the Institute for Gender and the Economy (GATE) at the University of Toronto. The YWCA and GATE prided themselves on a plan that included the perspectives and voices of Indigenous peoples and LGBTQIA+ individuals.¹⁵ Like other plans, the Canadian proposal takes an intersectional perspective, committing to funding mandates beyond childcare, including additional monies to realize the National Action Plan in response to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

In September 2020, Trudeau's Throne Speech echoed much of the language used in the plan and committed to a feminist economic recovery,

but then progress stalled.¹⁶ Finally, in November 2020, Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland presented the Fall Economic Statement, which billed itself as “a feminist plan” and stated “our recovery must be feminist and intersectional”.¹⁷ Freeland herself was no stranger to feminist policymaking, having supported Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy in her previous cabinet post as foreign affairs minister. As Minister of Finance, efforts surrounding the finance ministry's Fall Economic Statement turned the Prime Minister's commitment into a reality. Freeland solidified these commitments further in April 2021 when presenting the 2021 budget to the Canadian Parliament. In referencing Canada's commitment to establishing a universal system of early learning and childcare, Freeland said, “COVID has exposed something women have long known: without childcare, parents—usually mothers—can't work”.¹⁸ Freeland's statement framed these outlays not as costs but as investments in Canada's future.

Argentina: Women governing together

In Argentina, efforts to introduce feminist perspectives in policymaking predated the pandemic. The left-wing government of Alberto Fernández took office in December 2019, and Fernández had made support for feminist issues central to his campaign.¹⁹ Within the first 60 days of his administration, Fernández's Minister of Economy appointed Mercedes D'Alessandro to head a special division dedicated to gender equality. Her opening line was: “Poverty is sexist.”²⁰ Fernández also appointed Elizabeth Gómez Alcorta, a known progressive on issues related to gender and justice, as Minister of Women, Genders and Diversity.²¹ Together, D'Alessandro and Gómez Alcorta worked on the 2021 budget, coordinating through a dedicated office within D'Alessandro's division led by another feminist, Sol Prieto. The 2021 budget, presented to Parliament in September 2020, contained 55 specific line-item expenditures related to women and gender, amounting to 15.2 per cent of the overall budget

and 3.4 per cent of Argentina's gross domestic product (GDP).²² The expenditures include measures to address gender gaps in education, health care and employment and are "protected", a technical term that means their fulfilment will receive extra levels of transparency and scrutiny.²³ While the budget is framed as neither a COVID-19 recovery effort nor a 'feminist plan', D'Alessandro and Gómez Alcorta have acknowledged the connection between the pandemic and worsened gendered inequities in policy sectors such as employment.

More importantly, D'Alessandro and Gómez Alcorta are not acting in isolation. First, they are part of a WhatsApp group called *Mujeres Gobernando* (Women Governing), which also predates the pandemic. This 250-plus member group includes cabinet ministers, lawmakers, bureaucrats, union leaders, social movement leaders and business leaders from the national and subnational levels. Their goal: "Incorporate a gender perspective into public policies".²⁴ Second, Fernández has followed through on his campaign promises. When D'Alessandro and other Ministry of Economy staff convened a Federal Working Group on Economic Policy with a Gendered Perspective in September 2020, Fernández sent his highest-ranking representatives.²⁵ One month later, in October 2020, Fernández's chief of staff vowed a clear "change of priorities" when he

convened a National Cabinet on the Transversal Perspective of Public Policies. These meetings have built bridges across the government and to stakeholders in domestic and international civil society.²⁶

In addition to the gender budget, *Mujeres Gobernando* and some key leaders—D'Alessandro, Gómez Alcorta and Vilma Ibarra, one of Fernández's top advisors—have facilitated pandemic response measures such as creating 800 day-care centres, delivering relief packages to members of the trans community and adopting emergency allowances for housewives.²⁷ Some measures likely received funding from the *Aporte Solidario* (Solidarity Contribution), a one-off 2 per cent tax that Argentina levied on individuals with assets valued at more than \$2.45 million.²⁸ Passed in December 2020, the *Aporte Solidario* represents one way in which governments can invest in social protection and transformation.

Even though women remain under-represented in COVID-19 planning and decision-making, feminists in many parts of the world have come together and developed plans for COVID-19 response and recovery that offer unique templates for actions and new visions for the future.

WHAT PATHWAYS PRODUCE CHANGE?

That collaboration and coordination across state and society actors produced feminist policymaking in response to COVID-19 is not necessarily surprising. Scholars have documented similar trends in other gender policy areas, from reform of marriage and divorce laws to the adoption of gender quota laws and the liberalization of restrictions on contraception and abortion.²⁹ Scholars have also noted the factors that facilitate feminist efforts, including supportive chief executives and channels that preserve feminists' access to policymakers, including after the initial moment of adoption.

In Argentina and Canada, feminists' efforts were buoyed by high-level decision-makers whose commitments to gender-responsive policymaking predated the pandemic. These are the two countries where feminist plans have proceeded farthest, thanks again to chief executives' and ministers' openness to feminist ideas and political will. Yet even in Canada, about one year elapsed between Trudeau being advised to address the 'she-cession' and the unveiling of the 2021 budgetary commitments. In Hawai'i and elsewhere, feminist plans remain important advocacy tools, helping policy networks attain single-item reforms, piecemeal approaches that nonetheless lay the groundwork for future changes. That policy change proceeds slowly and unevenly, even in the context of the urgency demanded by the pandemic, underscores how new opportunities do not erase old challenges: Even with ostensibly supportive political leaders at the helm, feminists need to continue insisting and must guard against the watering down of their transformative goals.

Using feminist plans as advocacy tools

The Hawaiian plan inspired the globe but has not been formally adopted by the Hawai'i State Legislature or by the Governor. Nonetheless,

the plan serves as an advocacy tool for the Commission on the Status of Women. At the state level, Commission members have lobbied legislators and leaned on executive agencies to release funding for certain programmes, scoring victories in the areas of maternal health and food security. At the local level, they have persuaded four of Hawai'i's five county governments to adopt the plan, a critical victory considering the importance of US county governments in providing social services. Commission Executive Director Khara Jabola-Corolus explained this strategy following Kauai County's adoption of the plan, tweeting: "If upper government won't budge, organize close to home".³⁰

Advocates elsewhere have used their plans in similar ways. In Africa, the Feminist Recovery Plan written by the African Feminism collective has been presented to the African Union and provided important referent points for domestic advocates.³¹ The plan authored by the Women's Policy Group of Northern Ireland received the formal endorsement of the legislative assembly's All-Party Group on Women, Peace and Security.³² The Women's Policy Group also presented the plan to executive branch agencies, receiving written responses from civil servants in each agency, and they attained piecemeal victories such as securing the executive's promise that furloughed women workers would not lose their statutory maternity pay.³³

While piecemeal changes fall short of the transformative change envisioned by feminist planners, each small victory locks a new policy into place, creating forward momentum. As advocates have found in other instances, such as adopting gender quota laws, it is often easier to persuade those with power to support less ambitious policies that can be strengthened later than to pursue stronger policies that immediately alter the status quo.³⁴ Activists achieve these

small victories by working both horizontally—with legislators and bureaucrats—as well as vertically—with supranational, national and subnational levels of government. Maintaining the channels of communication between state and society actors is key for sustaining networks, building trust and finding the common ground necessary to win changes and sustain momentum. In Hawai'i, for instance, members of the Commission meet regularly with grassroots women's groups, explaining to organizations the state's perspectives on its limitations and communicating grassroots groups' concerns back to policymakers.

Reorienting priorities

The coronavirus pandemic has not affected all countries in the same way at the same time. Nor have divisions between high and low performers fallen neatly into divides based on Global North and Global South or rich and poor. For instance, the Lowy Institute examined countries' success at viral containment, looking at tests, cases and deaths. Their most recent rankings, published in March 2021, revealed that the top 20 performers included not just wealthy countries such as Iceland and New Zealand but also less-wealthy countries such as Cuba, Rwanda and Sri Lanka.³⁵ Wealth has not automatically led to good public health outcomes, with the Lowy Institute concluding that a number of developing countries even performed better than developed countries as the pandemic continued into 2021.³⁶ Many Global South countries struggled and even underreported mortality, but others displayed considerable resiliency: They acted quickly to communicate appropriate sanitary practices and adopted emergency social protection schemes, from mortgage relief to emergency food aid.³⁷ Importantly, however, data and trends measuring pandemic performance do not yet account for the spread of new coronavirus variants nor global disparities in vaccine access. Lack of vaccines will likely limit or even unravel low- and middle-income countries' efforts at pandemic containment.

Still, wealth has not guaranteed escaping the pandemic unscathed, which suggests that 'building back better' depends not just on resources but also on priorities that govern the use of those resources. Policymakers can follow feminists' urging and set priorities that guide resource allocations in ways that meet feminist goals. For example, women activists and lawmakers in Canada and the United States have sought publicly funded childcare, preschool and eldercare for decades, but COVID-19's 'she-cession' drew this need into even starker relief. Elsewhere, the pandemic has led countries to expand eligibility and funding for existing social protection schemes, even though such efforts were not always framed in feminist terms. Latin America rapidly expanded welfare measures in the early months, with a focus on cash assistance for households with children, for example.³⁸ In Sierra Leone, mayor Yvonne Aki-Sawyers received widespread publicity for creating day-care centres for women market traders.³⁹ These measures may not meet all existing need at the outset, but they constitute important advances.

“Building back better” depends not just on resources, but on priorities that govern the use of those resources. Feminist plans crucially help shape discourse on public spending, setting priorities that meet feminist goals.

Feminist plans help shape justifications for these expenditures, reframing how countries understand the economic value of policies and emphasizing why these policies must remain and expand in the long run. For instance, the shift from thinking about investments in universal income schemes and childcare not as service provision but as infrastructure spending—with a long-term return on investment equivalent to or even better than that reaped by building bridges, for example—exemplifies how feminist plans reset objectives.⁴⁰ As COVID-19 continues to have differential impacts on countries' public health and economic

growth, feminists can use these varied windows of opportunity to achieve long-sought goals as well as to push in new directions.

Keeping transformation in focus

Feminist plans' focus on transformation also helps advocates insist when implementation falls short. Gender mainstreaming shares feminist policymaking's transformative ambitions.⁴¹ Yet feminists are often disillusioned with gender mainstreaming because its implementation falters in many instances. Across Canada and Europe, civil servants report that gender responsiveness became reduced to an administrative procedure.⁴² The same critique has appeared among development practitioners.⁴³ This holds that policymakers focus more on checking the box—ensuring that a programme has an equal number of women and men beneficiaries, for example—than on designing programmes that dismantle underlying structures of injustice.

Even when programmes benefit solely or mostly women, they may lock in rather than challenge traditional gendered roles. In Hawai'i, the release of money for maternal health care and food

security programmes has helped grassroots women's organizations provide these services. In Kerala, India, the work of women's self-help collectives in pandemic recovery has received widespread acclaim: In existence since the 1990s, these groups quickly pivoted to COVID-19 relief, from cooking in community kitchens to sewing face masks.⁴⁴ All these services are essential and can empower both providers and recipients. Nonetheless, relying on women's (often uncompensated) labour to carry out traditionally feminized tasks does not realize the transformative vision underlying feminist plans.

By using the word 'feminist' rather than 'gender-sensitive' or 'gender-responsive', advocates have a vocabulary that allows them to identify how and when implementation falls short. For instance, the Northern Ireland plan calls for the Government to provide long-term—rather than temporary—funding to community-based women's groups in rural areas, which would enable grassroots groups to become stable, professional organizations with salaried workers rather than precarious associations with underpaid staff or unpaid volunteers.⁴⁵

BUILDING BACK BETTER

Feminists have developed plans for COVID-19 response and recovery, arguing that the pandemic offers national and local governments the opportunity to build back better. Response and recovery plans oriented towards justice include women and other marginalized groups in the decision-making process and implement public policies that address the underlying inequities that made COVID-19 disproportionately burden women in the first place. This brief review of feminist advocacy in COVID-19 response and recovery offers the following lessons:

1. State-society networks matter for making feminist commitments visible, giving gender- and

justice-based perspectives legitimacy, reorienting policy priorities and maintaining long-term momentum for change.

2. Incremental gains may pave the way for more transformative changes down the road if state-society networks are able to maintain their connectivity and influence.

3. Actors still need formal representation in the spaces where government decisions are made. When elite decision-makers have displayed feminist will, change has proceeded more rapidly.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Avani Johnson provided research assistance. This piece is based on a framing paper presented at the Expert Group Meeting “Advancing Feminist Policies in the Wake of COVID-19” for the Feminist Plan on Sustainability and Social Justice, which took place on 15 June 2021, and has benefited from those discussions.
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