

WECAN's Feminist Response to COVID-19: A Summary

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to uncover the structural inequalities in healthcare access and treatment, the gendered distribution of paid-and-unpaid care labor, and the disposable approach of neoliberal capitalism towards its workers, WECAN's COVID response aims to spotlight the interconnected relationship between economic marginalization and environmental exploitation, which affects all women and women-identifying persons, especially BIPOC women. It has become increasingly evident that communities who face the most direct impacts of the ongoing climate crisis are also situated at the frontline of COVID-19. Among Indigenous groups in the U.S., the pre-existing lack of medical centers close to, or within, Native American and Alaskan Native communities as well as inadequate clean running water and electricity in reservation housing pose a serious health threat.¹ Similarly, structural racism is severely impacting African American, Black, and Latinx communities. Years of continuous environmental racism and the deployment of 'sacrifice zones',² in which all of these BIPOC communities have been subjected to high levels of pollution and exposure to unregulated toxic materials, have allowed for the U.S.' highest death rates of the coronavirus to take place amongst residents in these communities.³ COVID-19 has revealed the racialized nature of pre-existing economic and social injustices that interfere with

¹ For further insight and recommended statistical data, please reference the Kaeding 2020 article.

² As explained by Casey Berkovitz, "[e]nvironmental racism refers to the many ways that communities of color—in the United States, Black communities in particular—face greater harms from environmental factors. The term, which was first articulated in studies of waste disposal, toxic dumping, and industrial uses, is now understood to encompass everything from the siting of industrial uses; to proximity to power plants and factories; to higher exposure to emissions from mobile sources of pollution, like cars, trucks, and ships; to the disproportionate harm that disasters like Hurricane Katrina do to Black communities" (Berkovitz, 2020).

³ Pre-existing health crises among low-income households and 'sacrifice zones of pollution', or "areas with pervasive exposure to toxic emission" (Fussell 2020), have made residents highly vulnerable to the spread of COVID-19. Furthermore, "[r]esearch [has] indicate[d that] race is the biggest predictor of whether a person lives near a heavily polluted area" (Fussell 2020).

the ability to follow public health guidelines, notably working from home⁴ and social distancing,⁵ as well as receiving proper healthcare during the crisis.

WECAN's primary finding is simply that if an economic system that prioritized human and environmental wellbeing had been established prior to the spread of COVID-19, neither the world population nor the global economy would be as negatively impacted as it is today. In other words, a caring economy that valued the regenerative nature of human rights, responded according to intersectionality across socio-economic demographics, and respected the rights of nature would have significantly different outcomes. In order to ensure the long-term potential for a post-COVID economic recovery, not only must feminism and anti-racism be integrated into the central platform of a post-COVID economic plan but also a more circular flow of capital and goods and services that centers people and planet above corporate gains and expanding military budgets. A reciprocal relationship between human needs and natural resources must be implemented in accordance with Indigenous knowledge of respect and reciprocity with the Earth and each other. Given the uniquely negative consequences of climate change on women across the world,⁶ it is crucial that action towards resolving gendered inequalities and gender-based violence simultaneously ensures better ecological balance. By providing social justice for all historically-marginalized groups,⁷ centering their leadership in decision-and-policy-making, and implementing Indigenous and socio-environmental justice and protections, the most holistic dismantling and restructuring of the current economic and political system can be accomplished instead of paving a path for future crises to take a similar toll.

⁴ “A study of the ‘Mission District’ community [cited below] in California showed that Latinos accounted for more than 95 percent of positive COVID-19 cases and 90 percent of individuals with positive tests were unable to work from home. Certain industries that have workers that are predominantly minorities face higher rates of COVID-19: At meatpacking plants [cited below], where the rate of COVID-19 infections is higher than the rate in 75 percent of US counties, nearly half [cited below] of workers are Hispanic and a quarter are African American” (

⁵ “The most likely groups to live in multi-generational households are Asians (25.8% in 2009), blacks (23.7%) and Hispanics (23.4%). The share living in multi-generational households is notably lower for non-Hispanic whites (13.1%) and mixed-race Americans (17.9%)” (Pew Research Center, 2011).

⁶ This statement can be further contextualized via the cited 2015 report by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security.

⁷ Including but not limited to Black, African American, Latinx, and immigrant communities as well as LGBTQ+ persons who face systemic discrimination and underrepresentation.

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