

UK: Calls for “gendered perspective” on COVID-19 conceal class issues

Julie Hyland
16 May 2021

“While more men have died from the [COVID-19] virus, women have suffered *more* due to the impact of policies introduced to prevent disease transmission.” (emphasis added).

It is difficult to conceive of a more inane, contemptible statement, which would draw a storm of protest were the outcomes reversed. But such is the conclusion of a study by researchers from the London School of Economics (LSE), promoted by the *Guardian* newspaper.

Officially, nearly 3.4 million people have died from COVID internationally. This is a vast underestimation due to under-reporting. The *Economist* magazine estimates this is at best less than half the total, and at worst one-quarter. Using the total of excess deaths globally, it puts the probable real figure at 10.2 million.

This is unprecedented outside of war, and most of these deaths are the result of wilful government inaction.

The Conservative government in Britain, like its counterparts the world over, has pursued a policy of herd immunity encapsulated in Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s insistence, last October, “No more f***ing lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands”. As a result, the UK has among the highest death rates from COVID-19 in Europe.

The suffering of those who have perished, and those they left behind, is immense. According to clinicians cited by *Nature* on “how does coronavirus kill?”, for those most severely impacted, the virus goes on a “ferocious rampage through the body, from brain to toes.”

“[The disease] can attack almost anything in the body with devastating consequences,” cardiologist Harlan Krumholz of Yale University and Yale-New Haven Hospital told the magazine. “Its ferocity is breath-taking and humbling.” Not only are the lungs likely to become overwhelmed, so that patients are unable to breathe, but, “Blood vessels leak, blood pressure drops, clots form, and catastrophic organ failure can ensue.”

The scale of deaths is not referenced in the LSE study, produced by Dr Clare Wenham (Assistant Professor of Global Health Policy) and PhD candidate Asha Herten-Crabb, nor in the *Guardian’s* accompanying article.

This is not accidental. From Europe to Asia and the Americas, working people have made the experience that it is their class position—determined by their relationship to ownership and control of the means of production—that is the common feature of the homicidal indifference to their fate taken by the powers-that-be. Nothing antagonises the upper middle-class purveyors of identity politics more than this fundamental truth—hence the efforts by sections of academia and the “liberal” establishment to insist on a racial and/or “gendered perspective” on the pandemic.

According to the Office of National Statistics, in England and Wales there has been an almost 18 percent difference in the total number of coronavirus-related deaths for men. But the LSE study and the *Guardian* are indifferent to such figures. What they want to focus on is the government’s failure “to consider gender” in its response to the pandemic.

To this end, the LSE researchers combed through minutes and background documents from 73 meetings of the government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), “to understand whether the gendered implications of [pandemic] policy were considered.”

It found that of the total “only 13 made explicit reference to gender terminology with further analysis showing these mentions all related to biological sex—for example that more men were dying and the risks posed by COVID-19 to pregnant women.”

Having dismissed such risks a priori, the research presents what it claims are the distinct ways in which women have been more affected—through job losses, furlough and/or increased childcare responsibilities.

Worldwide more than 100 million people suffer extreme impoverishment due to the pandemic, and millions more are on the edge. In Britain, more than four million are still furloughed, while applications for Universal Credit (jobless) benefit have risen by 113.2 percent since March 2020. Thousands more are ineligible for any assistance.

Here also, workers are suffering as a class. The figures available show that female redundancies in the UK hit 178,000 between September and November 2020, and 217,000 men over the same period. Between March 2020 and the end of February 2021, 2,337,900 women were furloughed compared with 2,144,700 men.

At any rate, the campaign for a “gendered perspective” on the pandemic is not really concerned with the plight of working class women. Its objective is baldly stated in the LSE study title, “Why we Need a Gender Advisor on SAGE”.

“We find that the acknowledgement of the gendered dynamics of particular issues, such as school closures and feminised (or masculinised) employment sectors, were largely absent in SAGE meeting minutes and that explicit references to women were largely of a biological (sex) nature, rather than social (gender),” they write.

The presence of women in SAGE (approximately 44 percent) “did not lead to greater awareness of gender issues”, they write. “Thus, whilst increasing the participation of women is important for the normative goal of gender parity in public life and leadership, this should not be seen as a synonym for gender advice. Being a woman doesn’t make you an expert in gender, no more than being French would make you an expert in French politics.”

No doubt, a position as gender advisor on SAGE would be a significant career advance for the successful applicant. It would change nothing for working class women—let alone the working class as a whole—who are now being forced into unsafe workplaces and education facilities, while facing cuts in jobs, pay and unsafe conditions.

This is underscored by the study's attack on the government's “narrow epidemiological approach” towards the pandemic, which excluded “broader social considerations, including gender, from SAGE’s ambit.”

Government policy was not driven by “epidemiology” but the profit interests of the financial oligarchy. The study makes just one reference to the policy of “herd immunity”, and not critically. Its main complaint is the “impact of policies introduced to prevent disease transmission” by the government, foremost of which was

limiting school places.

It complains, “Most detail of school closures within SAGE minutes focuses narrowly on its epidemiological aspect and the impact this would have on reducing NHS [National Health Service] capacity, or on analysing the risks of severe coronavirus infection amongst children.” No consideration was given to the “effects of school closures on women generally,” who had to pick up much of the resulting childcare responsibilities, it says.

The study, however, gives no consideration to the impact on the health of children, teachers (most of whom are women) and the wider community from keeping schools open. Indeed, in April 2020, just after the government was forced into announcing the first lockdown, Wenham presented a written submission together with Professor Sophie Harman, Queen Mary University of London, to the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee. Arguing that “Gender analysis must be factored into any future decision on extended school closures and openings,” the paper called to “Ensure one of the first industries to re-open as part of the exit strategy is childcare providers to facilitate women being able to return to work...”

This was at the time a major offensive began to insist on the full re-opening of schools as essential to driving parents back into unsafe workplaces. Against opposition from educators and many parents, it was forced through due to the role of the Labour Party and the trade unions, with the likes of the *Guardian* supplying justification from a “gendered perspective.”

This “perspective” is little more than a feminist twist on the “cure must not be worse than the disease” mantra of the ruling elite. Which is why it has been embraced by the government. The Women and Equalities Committee investigation into “gendered economic inequalities” during the pandemic has been endorsed by the Johnson government, which portrays its efforts to keep schools open as motivated by protecting women's rights.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact