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TACKLING SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

This is a monthly series on SMU research which aims to create significant impact by addressing these five societal challenges: **Economies & Financial Markets, Social Fabric & Quality of Life, Boundaries & Borders, Sustainability, Innovation & Technology.**

In this issue, SMU researchers offer their insights into the impact of Covid-19 on social fabric & quality of life.

Covid-19 shines a light on gender inequality

The pandemic might exacerbate inequalities at home and at work rather than address them, the latest study by SMU finds

The Covid-19 pandemic sweeping the world is raising awareness of the burden that women have to bear in running a home during a time when families are being forced to stay indoors. Some academics believe that this spotlight could lead to a more equal gender division of house and care work that could persist even after the end of the crisis.

However, research from Singapore Management University (SMU) sociologist Aliya Rao shows that the current situation is likely to "crystallise" rather than address gender inequality. This is because men are seen as responsible for paid work and women, even when in higher-paying jobs, are seen as bearing the responsibility for unpaid work. This includes monitoring kids' homework, organising food for the family, and making sure the home is clean, among other tasks. As such, unless societies tread carefully, Covid-19 might exacerbate gender inequalities at home and at work rather than undo them, argues Dr Aliya, who is an Assistant Professor of Sociology from SMU's School of Social Sciences.

"Extreme situations, like Covid-19, really function as a lens that amplify everyday processes. What the pandemic and the measures like the circuit breaker have done is illuminate the extremely unequal division of housework between men and women with children," she says.

Juggling work and home duties

During a lockdown, many families are no longer able to outsource care work to daycare centres and schools; requiring parents to juggle both their jobs and home-related duties.

"Paid work is continuing the same for the people who are lucky enough to have jobs, but working from home during the circuit breaker in Singapore, or lockdown elsewhere, has meant that parents, and especially mothers, are juggling with managing childcare and home-schooling while being expected to put in pretty much full days at work," explains Asst Prof Aliya.

Data supporting this trend is starting to emerge from countries like the US, as well as in Singapore from AWARE, the country's leading gender equality advocacy group. A report from Australia suggests that school closures have created an extra six hours of childcare related work for parents, of which women do four and men do two.

Asst Prof Aliya also notes that there is evidence to suggest that some women may be quitting their jobs in order to manage childcare during this time.

In the world of academia, where career progression is dependent on peer-reviewed publications, journals have reported receiving more articles from men during this time than at the same time last year; and with a dip in submissions from women. "This indicates that unequal caregiving, in academia, may impact careers down the line in particular," she says.

Gender roles unlikely to change

While men have been taking on more of the share of housework during the lockdown period, emerging evidence indicates that men's careers and income will continue to be prioritised post-pandemic.



Assistant Professor Aliya Rao

"My educated guess at this time is that gendered behaviours are likely to change temporarily, but in the absence of social policies and cultural norms that support more gender egalitarian behaviours and beliefs, these will not translate to longer-lasting changes in gender roles," says Asst Prof Aliya.

However, she believes that the pandemic is an ideal opportunity for society to properly acknowledge the value of care work, as well as its gendered nature.

"I think this is a key moment – when the value of care work simply cannot be ignored – to introduce structures and measures to provide support for care work in particular."

She adds: "Care work is indispensable and it is gendered. It pushes women out of the labour forces across all social classes, but those with lower levels of education are particularly vulnerable."

Changing societal norms

Addressing this issue will require investing in affordable and widespread day care, as well as putting in place policies such as paid parental leave, with provisions for both mothers and fathers to encourage a more equal division of childcare from the beginning.

Although far from perfect, some Scandinavian countries like Sweden have had success in using social policies to catalyse gender equality in terms of careers and caregiving for parents.

Social policies can also be a way to catalyse shifts in norms, especially related to the idea that men support their families by earning, and women by taking care of the home.

Furthermore, data shows that when men do contribute to unpaid work, it is primarily in the area of childcare; the kind of unpaid work that both parents like doing. Mothers, however, tend to do the kind of unpaid work that is viewed as thankless, such as cleaning toilets.

Says Asst Prof Aliya: "So I think one way for more gender equality is to use social policies to build robust systems where care work is not privatised and is supported by the society as a whole."

Struggling to stick to circuit breaker rules

Society needs to address the loneliness that results from social distancing for Singapore's vulnerable seniors

During Singapore's circuit breaker period, various incidences of the elderly flouting safe distancing rules emerged in the media, leading to concerns that this group in particular is struggling with the requirement to self-isolate.

Abiding by social distancing restrictions is understandably more difficult for lower-educated and illiterate seniors, as they usually obtain their information from a small circle of friends. When socialising outside of one's household was prohibited, seniors lost their main source of news. The elderly, especially those who live alone, also find it particularly hard to social distance due to sheer loneliness.

"Those who are not 'wired up' digitally are not able to augment face-to-face interactions with digital connections. Many used to rely on social networks they meet in the community centre and recreational settings for social support and information," says Paulin Straughan, Professor of Sociology (Practice) at Singapore Management University's School of Social Sciences.

"With social distancing measures in place, they find it harder to get to information, discuss rules and regulations, which tend to change swiftly as the situation is dynamic, and they end up being very confused."

A visible target

More seniors also appeared to be breaking circuit breaker rules as they are less able to evade enforcement efforts, compared with their younger and more mobile counterparts, argues Prof Straughan. She worries that this group is being made scapegoats in the name of keeping the community safe.

"We assume that it is harder for them to abide by the rules, but I think we perceive this only because they are caught. Many people do not conform, but they are 'hidden' in remote settings like parks and recreation spaces. The elderly living in the heartlands tend to be more visible as they sit in common spaces, and may be easily spotted by social distancing ambassadors," she says.

Dealing with loneliness

With more than half of Singapore residents aged 65 and above living alone or with their spouses only, this vulnerable group needs more support from society to get through this challenging period. Prof Straughan calls for the authorities to pay special attention to the elderly when implementing any new measure to contain the pandemic.

While she believes that social workers have been doing "amazing work" with door-to-door visits and telephone calls to engage with seniors during this time, more must be done on the digital front to help them. "To help the elderly during this period, we must be mindful of the digital gap, and must try to close this gap so that they are not left in social isolation."

Seniors who have no experience using computers and smart phones will not have the means to keep in touch with friends and family while they self-isolate, making them feel more alienated. And with only a few days' notice before the circuit breaker was put in place in early April, there was not enough time or opportunity to help the elderly become familiar with these devices.



Professor Paulin Straughan

Moving forward, if social distancing is the new norm, the government must design safe meeting spaces for the elderly so that they are still able to gather, but within safe parameters. This may involve opening up community spaces, while limiting the number of persons allowed in.

"I think it's very important to address the loneliness that results from social distancing for our vulnerable elderly. Concurrently, perhaps we can work towards a project that would empower them to use technology to connect with friends and chat groups," says Prof Straughan.

Closing the digital gap

Indeed, there needs to be a concerted effort to help the elderly bridge the digital divide if a longer-term solution to the issue of alienation is to be found. Such an initiative will need to go beyond just providing seniors with the infrastructure to stay connected.

"Wiring up housing estates and providing each household with a tablet is not sufficient. We have to ensure that our elderly are taught to use these devices in a safe manner. For example, to sign up for a Facebook account, you need an e-mail address," says Prof Straughan.

"I have received many bewildered looks when I tried to create a social media presence for our Pioneer Generation and Merdeka Generation members. And when there is a software update, another round of confusion occurs when accounts are frozen because of incompatibility of software versions."

The problem is particularly urgent for seniors who live alone and do not have family members to assist them in digital matters. As such, Prof Straughan proposes bringing the technology to where the elderly gather, in order to better help them acquire the knowledge they require to stay connected to the rest of society.

In this regard, the recent setting up of the SG Digital Office (SDO) to help local stallholders and the elderly join the online world is timely. The initiative will involve 1,000 digital ambassadors reaching out to these groups to support them in their digital journey. Says Prof Straughan: "It is one thing to step up on hardware, but it is equally important to invest in software and the training of digital ambassadors who can handhold our older adults and empower them to leverage technology."

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