

Women's Rights Action Group Service
Worship Associate Opening Remarks
By: Nikky Contractor

When I first began preparing my remarks over a month ago, I had something different planned: women, science and the glass ceiling - a topic near and dear to my heart. However, as the world around us has rapidly changed, it felt more and more important to me to address the novel Coronavirus, and particularly to speak about its impact on women. "Across the world, women's independence will be a silent victim of the pandemic" writes Helen Lewis in an article published in The Atlantic entitled "The Coronavirus is a disaster for feminism". The World Health Organization or WHO declared the Coronavirus a Pandemic on March 11, 2020. That was just two short months to the day since China recorded its first death from the novel Coronavirus. COVID-19, as the novel Coronavirus is now called, originated in Wuhan province, China, likely in November, and has quickly spread around the world. Amidst the daily onslaught of news about the total number of COVID-19 cases, the number of deaths, the shortages of medical supplies, the rapid progression from recommendations to stay at home, to a complete shift to the elimination of gatherings both large and small, to working from home, and school from home, it's difficult to think about the potential consequences of this pandemic beyond tomorrow.

But think about it we must, because women are on the front lines. According to the WHO Roughly 70% of the global health-care workforce is made up of women. Women are caregivers. Not only as health care workers but also at home. In households where both parents work, and the kids are in school, now everyone is at home. The burden of care falls disproportionately with women. While some households will undoubtedly share in the burden of care-giving equally, many couples will make this decision along more archaic lines, practical decisions will be made along the lines of "Who is paid less? Who has the flexibility?" As the majority of women are still paid less than men, are more likely to be employed part-time or in the temporary workforce, it's not difficult to imagine the outcome of these conversations.

We need look no further than the Ebola outbreak in Africa in 2014 for clues to the possible outcomes. Julia Smith, a health-policy researcher at Simon Fraser University has found that in the affected African countries, men's income levels have returned to pre-outbreak levels much faster than women.

The social and economic impact of this pandemic on women can not be underestimated. Let's us also not forget that self-isolation may lead to social-isolation which in turn will give rise to an increase in domestic violence as has already been reported in China's experience with COVID19 outbreak.

Helen Lewis concludes in her article in the Atlantic that "This could be the first outbreak where gender and sex differences are recorded, and taken into account by researchers and policy makers" Let's walk away with that good news. But let us not HOPE that this information will be used to create sensible policies to support women. While we struggle to cope with the everyday

realities of our new, if temporary, normal, let us not forget to continue to advocate for policies that will impact women in the long term, such as emergency child-care provisions, and economic security for small-business owners. Let's not let the need to manage the crisis in front of us, blind us to the possibilities of the potential long term consequences and opportunities.