The following statement reflects on the outcomes of the Feminist Working Group Meeting 2020 on Feminist Activism in Times of Emergency. Young socialist-feminists of IUSY member organisations from all over the world gathered online from the 11th to the 13th of May 2020 to discuss a range of topics such as sexual and reproductive rights and health, menstrual hygiene, domestic violence, reproductive work, social security and inequalities in the labour market.

A "NEW NORMAL"?

Because of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the structural inequalities within the capitalist system, as well as its inherent proneness to crisis are displayed once again. In these times, it is apparent that the world will not and should not be the same again. As numerous politicians, experts and institutions begin to refer to a “new normal,” it is an imperative for us as socialist-feminists to question the status quo and imagine and work towards social justice and gender equality. Feminized occupations with undignified wages, such as care work, service work such as in food retail or cleaning and public infrastructures are suddenly acknowledged as „systemically relevant”. In times of crisis, as we’ve already seen in the economic crisis of 2008, the market economy prevails by drawing on the unpaid and invisible domestic labour performed mostly by women. Therefore, capitalism is also based on the exploitation of women. From an intersectional point of view, women of the so-called global south and less wealthy countries face a specific form of exploitation, as can be seen by looking at their role in global care chains. This group of women is right now being deployed in different parts of the world to maintain the health care crisis.

Worldwide, marginalised groups are hit the hardest by the current crisis. Yet, their multiple burdens seem to be invisible and not cared for by national governments around the world. This renders feminist activism as more important than ever in times of crisis and a socialist-feminist approach as essential in combating its consequences, as well as its source - the capitalist system. The capitalist system, which in its core is a patriarchal system. Looking at the power structures in capitalism, one must acknowledge them together with the underlying gender relations that back it up. Socialists ought not to leave women’s livelihoods and feminist demands aside when focusing on the crisis and how to overcome it. The gender lens should be seen as an imperative in combating economic and social inequalities, not as a contradiction or side-piece to the socialist struggle.

In this global crisis, countries throughout the world face similar challenges, but there are also opportunities. Overcoming a crisis can never mean to simply “get back to business”. As Young Socialists, it is on us to let our progressive ideas for a better world be heard. We must oppose the “new normal”, in which economic and social inequalities are reinstalled and the balance of power is shifting from the democratic pillars of national states to the implementation of repressive measures and the continuous dismantling of democracy.
PRECARIOUS JOBS AND WEAKENED WELFARE SYSTEM

Welfare systems around the world have been a target of state expenditure cuts for decades. The consequence is a precarious situation within institutions of public healthcare for workers and patients alike. Long working hours, undignified wages and non-sufficient resources have turned jobs in hospitals and care-facilities into precarious working environments. Undocumented domestic care workers from developing countries face specific difficulties, as their labour in precariousness often stays invisible, in addition to the lack of social security available to them. Overall, the access to healthcare has become harder, which especially affects socio-economically weaker groups. The current health-care crisis due to corona affirms this.

The weakness of welfare systems boosted the health-care crisis. A high percentage of women is employed in this, as well as other systemically relevant sectors, which are on the forefront to sustain the well-being of societies during the current crisis.

INVISIBLE, YET CRUCIAL DOMESTIC WORK

As women are facing multiple burdens, they’re taking the lead in performing reproductive and care work at home. Unpaid domestic work remains invisible, even further so during the global pandemic. In the patriarchal system, care work is gendered. Tasks such as cooking, cleaning and taking emotional care of children and spouses are rendered a ‘woman’s job’.

As we’ve seen in 2008, in times of crisis women are pushed back into the private realms of the family-household to solely carry the burden of informal and unrecognized, domestic work. No economic value is being put on domestic working tasks. Although, Marxist analysis shows how reproductive work at home is essential to execute work in the labour market. This leads to an economic dependency on male counterparts. Clearly, the ‘male breadwinner-model’ does not suffice to keep families afloat, nor does parents working two jobs. Declining family incomes and shrinking social services are a strain for many households. Single-parent households are especially overwhelmed by these developments.

In the current pandemic, parents are struggling to manage households, raise and educate their children, while working from home or dealing with sudden unemployment. Economic difficulties and risk of poverty creates tension in many households.
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence is on the rise in households around the globe. Quarantine orders make it hard for affected groups to physically distance themselves from their abusers. Important to mention is the situation of LGBTQ+ people, who are stuck at home with their families’ discriminatory conduct towards their sexuality and/or gender.

The socio-economic causes for the increase in cases of domestic violence during the corona-crisis prove that domestic violence is not a private problem, but a social issue. National governments have faced criticism for their inaccurate law regulations concerning the pandemic and lack of support of small-scale businesses and workers alike. They must also be held accountable for how they maintain the safety of a country’s most vulnerable and marginalised groups, such as women, children, the elderly, queer people, people of colour and ethnic minorities, during a pandemic and altogether. Additional to safety and existential threats, the crisis also signifies a threat to women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights.

SRHR ISSUES AND MENSTRUAL HYGIENE

Due to the increase in domestic violence, the danger of sexual assault and with it the risk of unplanned pregnancies rises. The crisis makes the access to contraceptives, family planning tools, as well as abortion harder and more challenging - for many women, especially in rural areas, this has already been an issue. On the other hand, pregnant women may not get medical assistance and services they need. According to the UN, the pandemic could lead up to 7 Mio. unwanted pregnancies, along with the fact that up to 47 Mio. have no access to modern contraceptives in the midst of the pandemic. The UN also predicts a rise in forced marriages.

SRHR issues arise due to legal (e.g. countries in which abortion is illegal or has a contested status) or accessibility reasons (rural areas or lack in times of crisis; high prices/tax). In case of menstrual hygiene products, women in some developing countries lack access, because of production or imports that are being put on hold.
Corona has shown the world what's possible. Levels of economic productivity were lowered tremendously. Many lives were turned upside down and usual tasks, no matter if work-related or for school and education, were suddenly completed from home. Workers kept receiving payments, benefits were extended and money has started to finally be put into public sector budgets that really need it. Since the start of the lockdown, debates on the 30-hour work week and inheritance tax have been stimulated. Nonetheless, socio-economic issues are coming to a head, as millions have lost their jobs and there’s sparks of fear as a devastating economic crisis, that will certainly further deepen poverty and social inequalities, is approaching fast. Besides an economic and health-care crisis stands a crisis of democracy. Authoritarian/right-wing leaders are making use of the current situation to extend and deepen their powers. People may cling to the “order” presented by authoritarian/right-wing leadership as an answer to the pandemic and expected subsequent economic crisis. Conspiracy theorists are seizing the fears in different communities as they are catalysing a racist narrative of the spread of the Coronavirus by placing the blame on refugees. For the left, this signifies a challenge to lead with a progressive discourse on how to maintain the virus and face the crisis. And especially, how to move forward after the crisis. As a dismantling of democracy proceeds to take place, repressive measures are being implemented. These circumstances have manifested themselves in a rise of police violence, for which the death of George Floyd has now become a widely-known symbol of. Police brutality and structural racism are by far not only problems in the US, but just as well in Europe, Russia and Asian countries. Powerful images of protests all around the world show the people taking a stand against oppressive power and white supremacy. In global politics, white men have traditionally abused their powers, while excluding marginalised groups from important decision-making processes. So, it is that during a pandemic, the needs of women, LGBTIQ+ people, POC, ethnic minorities are not being met. After Corona, the world needs to ultimately face inequalities and its causes and origins, also in the light of the global environmental crisis.

The Corona crisis is one of many crises we are facing and be it the economic, health-care or climate crisis, they are all linked to the capitalist economy and societal structures that come with it. Marginalised groups, such as women, are met with a series of specific and sometimes overlapping challenges. The Feminist Working Group therefore discussed direct actions member organisations of IUSY can take to raise awareness and to change discourses and facilitate structural change for the improvement of all peoples’ lives.

AFTERMATH CORONA: WHERE IS THE CURE FOR GLOBAL OPPRESSION AND INEQUALITIES?
RAISING AWARENESS ON GENDER EQUALITY IN OUR POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS

Gender inequality continues being strongly present in politics and in political organisations. Even if our organisations continue fighting for equality we are not free from internalized discriminatory behaviors of the oppressive structures. Changing attitudes and political culture should be the goal of our youth organisations to develop critical awareness and empowerment to challenge the inequalities within our organisation and beyond. Our organisations should be truly feminist organisations. Women, transwomen, intersex and non-binary people still face discrimination on a daily basis in many of our organisations. We should be the ones creating visibility, starting conversations and speaking up.

As young socialists, we should be aware of the exciting inequalities and incorporate gender perspective in our organisational culture and policies. Continuous educational work for equal rights and awareness of gender stereotypes, gender discrimination and privileges within our organisations should be part of our everyday work. Therefore, we can start by creating feminist working groups or committees within our organisations, organising local, regional and national meet-ups, hosting discussions, using creative potential of our organisations and creating feminist videos, using social media channels for raising awareness through campaigns. International solidarity is and should be the core of this process. Coming together we give support and strength to each other. Continuous exchanges and learning should take place in order to challenge and change the current situation.
POLITICAL ACTIONS TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY

The above-mentioned issues that have been identified by the working group require strong, continuous actions to be taken. Working group suggests the following action to organise and call for:

LOSS OF PRECARIOUS JOBS, THE WEAKENING OF THE WELFARE SYSTEM AND DOMESTIC WORK

- A short-term action to call for is to provide free online healthcare consultation services, as well as free calls for medical consultations via the phone. For that, vulnerable groups and families need to have a good internet access free of charge. Besides the health sector, the arts sector is highly precarious as well. It’s yet another sector, in which women are highly represented. Governments have yet to respond with an adequate financial support for artists and musicians during this crisis.
- Corona shined a merciless light on the structural weaknesses of capitalism in providing basic needs. Socialists everywhere must contribute to raise political pressure to abolish social expenditure cuts and extend the funding of the health sector and social welfare institutions.
- Labour laws must be amended and precarious jobs abolished to make way for secure working places with dignified wages. Such jobs must particularly be generated in the healthcare sector. We can propose such amendments by using our link to socialist/socialist-democratic parties, be they in government or holding the role of the opposition.
- We are advocating for the implementation of the right for universal healthcare. Member organisations could start a campaign on the right to healthcare. The topic could also be easily incorporated into a campaign for universal basic income.
- Universal basic income is the way to eradicate poverty and create more equal opportunities. But universal basic income goes beyond employment, as it would improve health, reducing stress and giving people more freedom of choice on their time. This will trigger different conversations of what counts as work, what involves care and how we can contribute positively to our surroundings.
- In this context, the debate on the valuation of domestic work/housework and care tasks must be revived. They must be given economic importance and valued monetarily, as well as fairly be divided between all members of society, no matter their gender.
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- Safety shelters for women, children and LGBTIAQ+-people must be kept open during a crisis. These shelters generally need a better economic support from states. NGOs and government ministries dealing with domestic violence require sufficient financial resources and should be immune to budget cuts.
- During a trial against their abusers, women need to be provided social housing and further social and economic support.
- Domestic violence must finally be dealt with as a social issue. Campaigns on the issue can be organised as well as calling on politicians and decision-makers to get educated on needed actions to take.
- National hotlines in all countries can be set up for victims of domestic violence.

SRHR ISSUES AND MENSTRUAL HYGIENE

- Improved care has to be given to mothers and newborns during the crisis. Under all circumstances must they be provided extensive prenatal, delivery, postnatal care.
- Contraception needs to be made available for reduced prices.
- Taxes on menstrual hygiene products have to be reduced immensely or made available for free. What could aid in their availability is to change their status to medical supplies. In June, the government in New Zealand announced that it will provide free sanitary products in schools in an effort to start tackling period poverty. Period poverty affects girls and women everywhere, therefore they need to be made available to all of them. Educational is also needed to erase the stigma around the topic menstruation.
OPPRESSION, REPRESSIVE MEASURES AND POLICE BRUTALITY

- Countries are hit differently by repressive measures during corona. In our struggles, we need each other’s support as left (socialist) organisations. This support can come in the form of providing financial resources or setting up other supportive infrastructures, in which we share strategies, educational materials and contents. No organisation or collective movement should be left behind.
- Social media campaigns could lead to a rise of public awareness on state oppression, dismantling of democracy and oppression of civil media and civil society. In the case of police brutality, we’ve seen how much of an impact a witness video gone viral can have, as the murder of George Floyd started major uprisings against police brutality all around the world. In order for the protests no to end after a couple week time, structural oppression and inequality must be tackled in continuous action and awareness-making.
- In order to keep uncovering problem areas in the balance of power, we need a free and strong global media landscape. As critical media has been repeatedly attacked by conservative forces, we must maintain joined forces with them. Such an alignment can be declared by publishing support statements directed at them in different countries.
- Police departments could be gradually defunded and resources be reallocated toward community-based services of safety, support and prevention.
- In order to change structures, all voices and demands must be heard. Fem and non-binary voices need to be heard and pushed as leaders in their communities and in political realms.