

## Women's Health and Covid-19

An Anthology by the City of Vienna Women's Health Programme

### Abstract

The present anthology on Women's Health and Covid-19, compiled by the Vienna Women's Health Programme, opens a feminist public health perspective on the Covid-19 pandemic. 47 articles discuss the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on women's health. The collection of scientific analyses, practical reports from Viennese organisations, and individual experience reports provides a variety of different perspectives of the crisis. In 12 chapters, the anthology documents the highly formative first phase of the pandemic from mid-March to mid-August 2020. The topics covered include mental and physical health, sexual and reproductive health, inequality and discrimination, the role of people working in critical jobs and care, as well as the economic impact and the labour market effects of the crisis. The articles shed light on the relationship between space and gender, disabilities, migration and flight, girls and seniors, caregiving, and feminist initiatives by the City of Vienna. Altogether, the authors conclude that the Covid-19 crisis, as a public health crisis and an economic crisis, affects women and men differently and reinforces inequalities.

Published in early January 2021, the anthology is available for free [download](#).

It received the Vienna Health Promotion Media Award in 2021.

### The basis: a comprehensive health concept

On February 25, 2020, the first Corona cases were registered in Austria. Soon after, on March 13, 2020, the Austrian federal government enacted official exit restrictions for the first time. For the team of the Vienna Program for Women's Health, it was clear from the beginning that the pandemic would have an impact on women, their lives and their health. After all, "Health is created and lived by people within the settings of their everyday life; where they learn, work, play and love" (WHO Ottawa Charter 1986). Policies, determinants of health and public health are closely interrelated ("Health in All Policies" approach). Life circumstances are therefore crucial to health.

### Aims of the anthology

- ❖ Long-term documentation of the impact of the Corona crisis on women's health
- ❖ Making available lessons learned during the crisis
- ❖ Highlighting achievements of associations and organisations in Vienna during the crisis
- ❖ Providing a feminist public health analysis of the Corona crisis

## Selected examples for impact during the first phase of the pandemic:

### Focus topic: *Sexual* and Reproductive Health.

- ❖ Exit restrictions made it hard for low-income women to access low-cost or free contraceptives.
- ❖ At the beginning of the pandemic, there were major barriers to accessing abortion (exit restrictions, hospitals focused on emergencies).
- ❖ Sex work: Brothels were closed at times. As a result, many sex workers lost their jobs and homes. Until April 2021, an Austrian bank account was required to apply for support from Hardship Fund – a requirement many sex workers in Austria do not fulfil. Debt or financial hardship aggravate exploitative dependency relationships.

### Focus topic: Care work

- ❖ Remote work, home schooling and entry restrictions for professional caregivers led to an increase in unpaid work.
- ❖ Women performed a much higher share of the unpaid work than men.
- ❖ The situation exacerbated the existing burden on single parents – most of which are single mothers.

### Focus topic: Mental health

- Increased social and economic stress factors, as well as the increase in cases of violence, has had a negative impact on mental health.
- People started to feel isolated. For migrants, this was compounded by the geographic separation from their families and travel restrictions. Elderly people in care facilities were not allowed to have visitors during this first phase of the pandemic. The situation was also very tense for refugee women, who are per se under a lot of psychological stress given their memories of war and fleeing their home, and due to their generally uncertain future prospects.
- An Austrian online study published in April 2020 (Pieh) already showed an increased prevalence of mental conditions (depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms) at the beginning of the pandemic compared to previous years. The groups most affected were women, young adults, as well as people who were single, unemployed or had to live on low incomes. About 25% of the women participating in the study showed symptoms corresponding to clinical depression, as did 17% of the male respondents.
- The psychological burdens also weighed down professional health care workers and caregivers within the family – again, the majority of this group being women. “Caregiver burnout” became a clear and present risk.
- There is a risk of long-term consequences for mental health.

Anthology "Women's Health and Covid-19 "

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