

## UPF Inter'ntl: Impact of COVID on the Family: Devastating Challenges for Poor

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**UPF International** -- The webinar, "The Family: Charting the Way Forward, Post-Pandemic" was co-sponsored by the UN NGO Committee on the Family and the Universal Peace Federation on February 24, 2022. The first expert explored changes in work-family gender roles and preferences in the home due to COVID lockdowns in the US. A quite different focus was addressed by the second speaker on the devastating impact on some of the poorest areas in the Philippines, directly caused by the economic deterioration due to COVID.



**Dr. Jenet Erickson**, Senior Fellow in Maternal and Child Wellbeing, Institute for Family Studies, Affiliated Scholar at the Wheatley Institution, and Social Service Research Fellow for the Heritage Foundation, was our first speaker. According to a 2005 study, in the US 30% of mothers with young children prefer to work from home and yet only 1% were able to do so. As we know, due to COVID, many parents had to work from home. Erickson's research found that this led to an increase in the actual preference of working from home not only for mothers but also fathers. After having to work from home, a surprising overall rate of 53% of fathers reported now preferring to work from home while college-educated fathers wanted to work from home at a higher rate of 65%. Another 2021 survey showed that 37% of both parents prefer both having flexible hours and sharing childcare and 27% preferring that one parent stays home full time

to care for the children. The least-desired situation was using a full-time nanny or institutional childcare. Thus, in the US post-COVID, most couples wanted to coordinate together in order to provide childcare for their children at home.

Dr. Erickson stated this data seems to indicate an interesting attitudinal change in the US from the prevalent "workism" or valuing career as the most important source of identity and life satisfaction, to "familism" or recognizing family relationships as being the most important source of meaning and happiness. In the US, COVID made this choice at first necessary but, with some work flexibility, also possible. This new desire to have more time caring for children was found among the most educated women who generally have more options for careers. In the US, the desire seems to be trending from "job-friendly families to family-friendly jobs," putting parenting and the family first.

Dr. Erickson then addressed the issue of child development and the type of childcare provided. Research has found that optimal infant brain development occurs through a close, secure, and consistent relationship with the primary caregiver. In fact, studies show that institutional care of children can have benefits for some children, but it also increases the risk of social-emotional and behavioral problems for the child which increases as the hours spent in institutional care increases. She explained that the longest longitudinal study on predictors of well-being resulted in the recognition that the foundation for relational success throughout the rest of life is laid in those first primary relationships, ideally by the parents.

According to Dr. Erickson, studies show that although men in the US seem to prefer more involvement with their children, there also remain some preferences by sex as to that role. That is, fathers tend to be more involved in the active, playful role as well as being the provider. The mother tends to be more involved in the caregiving in the first year or two due to biological and neurological factors. The happiest couples, according to research, function in this manner or what is called in "neo-traditional" roles. Dr. Erickson commented that, certainly, when people can have choice in the way they handle caring for their children they are happier. Hopefully this can be facilitated by more family-friendly policies worldwide for all families.

**Melissa Villa**, Co-founder and Executive Director of Project Pearls (PP), described the efforts of her organization to provide food and education to some of the poorest areas in the Philippines. Her story was quite a contrast to Dr. Erickson's presentation. Ms. Villa explained that the government provides subsidies and food stamps to the poor but with the extreme impact of COVID, these provisions were largely inadequate. The harsh lockdown in the Philippines had a dramatic impact on the lack of food in these poor communities. Unemployment was already a main reason for the poverty in these communities, but the decrease in jobs and commerce due COVID worsened the situation. As much of the food this

population consumes comes from scavenging garbage thrown out by restaurants, when restaurants were shut down these people were left with little to no food. With that, signs of child malnutrition were becoming alarmingly very evident. Many of the families are large with many children to feed. During the pandemic, the concern of these people was not infection but a very real fear of starvation. PP responded by more than doubling the number of meals provided daily to more than 25,000 a month. Many families got in long lines as early as midnight in order to receive their one meal for the next day. Ms. Villa reported that PP's effort was not enough but it made a significant difference for these families' survival.



A second major emphasis of Project Pearls is providing education to poor communities. The Philippines offers free education but often parents are without the means to buy books or even get their children to school. During the pandemic parents did not have the option of providing schooling at home and did not have laptops to help their children learn online. PP's learning centers, however, were able to provide a space and online access to many of these children and even literacy programs to some of the parents. Over the years, the PP Scholars program also has been able to support over 700 children to progress from pre-school to graduate from college. Their educational support became even more needed during the pandemic and Project Pearls was able to step up and expand its programs, even adding educational home visits.

Ms. Villa explained that the vaccine rate was quite low in these communities because of insufficient access to health care and an anti-vaccine sentiment toward their Chinese-derived vaccines. Ms. Villa reported that somehow these communities were spared high outbreaks of COVID, perhaps because of the natural immunities developed in such unsanitary living conditions. Project Pearls' local health clinics provided some basic health care to alleviate some of these families' health issues.

In sad contrast to Dr. Erickson's data on improved equality of childcare and household responsibilities shared between a husband and wife, Mrs. Villas stated there is a real need to address inequalities in attitudes of men towards women in these communities. She said that there is a tendency for husbands in these poor communities to use alcohol or drugs. This often leads to husbands' domestic violence and sexual aggressiveness toward their wives, and even sometimes toward their own daughters. Project Pearls has developed some programs that foster positive attitudes between husbands and wives in the home, but she noted that much more needs to be done.

During the question-and-answer session, many in the audience remarked that the plight of these poorest of poor communities in the Philippines was truly shocking. Much appreciation was expressed toward Ms. Villa's exemplary work through Project Pearls. Clearly, much more of these kinds of programs are needed. It was also heartening to hear that in the US, COVID led to more equal sharing of home and childcare duties between husband and wife and increased efforts by the parents to provide childcare and education to children at home. Dr. Erickson had pointed out that the long-term benefits for children raised by more involved, present, and cooperative parents would be in the long term not only for the well-being of children but stability and productiveness of society. It seems we were left with many mixed and unsettled feelings but more clarity of action we need to take and bigger dreams for all families wherever we are in the world.