

Background Paper

Update on UN-Women's Response to COVID-19

UN-Women Executive Board Annual Session 2020

I. Introduction

1. The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to halt or reverse the gains of decades of collective effort on gender equality and women's empowerment. Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the effects of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls in every country of the world. At the same time, women are critical to our resilience and recovery, making these efforts more effective in the long and short term.

2. Women are playing a disproportionate role in responding to the disease, including as frontline healthcare workers, caretakers at home, and community leaders and mobilizers. Globally, women make up 70 per cent of workers in the health and social sector. Women do three times as much unpaid care work as men, so when health systems are overloaded, that burden lands largely with women. The global crisis triggered by COVID-19 has highlighted the fact that the world's formal economies and the maintenance of our daily lives are built on the invisible and unpaid labor of women and girls. We know that the crisis will likely roll back the already tenuous gains on women's labour force participation, including for the 740 million women who currently work in the informal economy. This will have devastating impacts on women's personal and family incomes. Prior to COVID-19, rates of violence against women and girls were already alarming, with one in three women globally having experienced physical or sexual violence at some point in their lives.¹ When households are placed under strain domestic violence usually goes up. COVID-19 is likely driving similar trends right now, as well as in the aftermath of the crisis, as unemployment and financial worries increase.² At the same time, the attention drawn to ways in which women's work has underpinned the sustainability of economic and social structures, including through the care and informal labour economies, provides an opportunity to recognize that work and address long-standing obstacles to gender equality.

3. The pandemic has not only strained health systems, deepened socio-economic inequalities, but it is also changing strategic, political and funding priorities. Public, private, and social sector institutions are revisiting priorities and shifting resources. Currently, global funding for women and girls in humanitarian crises is falling significantly short of requirements and there is a problematic shortfall in the amount of funded activities on COVID-19 that take a gender-intentional approach, and target or tailor approaches based on the specific needs of women and girls. This will become increasingly significant as the pandemic's socioeconomic consequences deepen and is critical to building a better and more equal, inclusive and sustainable world.

¹ <http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/violence/9789241564625/en/>

² This data is profiled in greater depth in the UN Secretary-General's *Policy Brief: The impact of COVID-19 on Women*. This brief demonstrates how women and girls' lives are changing in the face of COVID-19, and outlines priority measures to ensure women and girls' needs and rights are addressed both the immediate response and longer-term recovery efforts.

II. UN-Women's Response Framework

4. UN-Women's [response framework](#) focuses on five priorities to address the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls:

- a) incidence and impact of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, is mitigated and reduced;
- b) social protection and economic stimulus packages serve women and girls;
- c) people support and practice the equal sharing of the burden of care;
- d) women and girls lead and participate in COVID-19 response planning and decision-making; and
- e) gender is mainstreamed into national, regional and global efforts including through gender data and coordination mechanisms.

5. These priorities not only provide the framework for UN-Women's response at regional and country levels, but also form the basis of a series of global policy briefs, as well as UN-Women's inputs in UN Sustainable Development Group processes, including the United Nations COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund. UN-Women is an ex officio member of the Advisory Group to the Fund.

a) [Gender-based violence, including domestic violence, is mitigated and reduced](#)

6. UN-Women is raising awareness of and responding to the “shadow pandemic” of violence against women and girls (VAW), reports of which have dramatically increased across the world in lockdown conditions. UN-Women's multi-faceted response includes integration of VAW within national policy response; access to essential services, including helplines and shelters; data collection on the extent and impact of COVID-19 on VAW; and direct support to women's civil society organizations. A policy brief has been issued, providing emerging evidence of the impact of the recent global pandemic of COVID-19 on violence against women and girls and forms part of the [EVAW COVID-19 briefs series](#).

7. Across regions and countries, UN-Women is raising awareness on the scope and impact of COVID-19 on VAW and working directly with national and local authorities, including the police and judicial sector, to address impunity of perpetrators, and ensure VAW prevention is incorporated within policy responses and social assistance packages. At the global level, a centerpiece of UN-Women's advocacy has been to call for shelters, hotlines and support services to be declared as ‘essential’ by Governments and prioritized. The Secretary-General issued an appeal urging all governments to make the prevention and response to violence against women a key part of national response plans for COVID-19. 146 Member States positively responded to the appeal and UN-Women is supporting the efforts of several of these countries.

8. For example, in **Cameroon, Central African Republic, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria** and **Senegal**, UN-Women focuses on strengthening access to essential and quality services for women survivors of violence during the pandemic. UN-Women is also supporting partners to update referral pathways and service delivery protocols, including with police and justice institutions in **Bolivia, Ecuador, South Africa, Sudan, Trinidad and Tobago** and **Vanuatu**. In **Colombia**, UN-Women supported the Ombudsperson in creating a high-level group on COVID-19

and Violence against Women, which convenes several state institutions, and collaborated with partners to establish VAW services as *essential* services and increase support to shelters. Through the **UN Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces Initiative**, UN-Women is deepening support across municipal departments to ensure safe public spaces for women and girls during the crisis.

9. UN-Women is monitoring and/or undertaking rapid assessments and by collecting data on violence against women and girls and COVID-19 in several countries, including **Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Fiji, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Malawi, Morocco, Palestine, South Africa, Tonga, Tunisia** and **Vanuatu**.

10. UN-Women is increasing flexible funding for CSOs working on VAW by providing core funding to help them adjust to challenges arising as a result of the COVID-19 crisis and to ensure the stability of projects and sustainability of the organization in the longer term. In partnership with the Spotlight Initiative and the UN Trust Fund to End VAW, US\$ 9 million have been allocated for immediate support to women's organizations in sub-Saharan Africa with a primary focus on the institutional response, risk mitigation and recovery in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

b) [Social protection and economic stimulus packages serve women and girls](#)

11. Women disproportionately work in insecure, lower-paid, part-time and informal employment, with little or no income security and social protection, such as health insurance. UN-Women's response includes ensuring that economic relief and recovery measures are gender-responsive; support for assessments to drive gender-responsive policy responses; support to women-owned enterprises; private sector engagement; and gender-responsive procurement.

12. In partnership with the ILO, UN-Women is conducting rapid impact assessments on employment and gender, estimating public investment needs in the health and care sectors and supporting the design of gender-responsive economic stimulus packages by identifying entry points for both cushioning the impacts of the crisis and for ensuring economic recovery. A guidance note to UN-Women country offices has been issued to support the mainstreaming of gender perspectives in socio-economic and fiscal stimulus packages. The note, which can also be used by partners, will form the basis of a more detailed policy tool to be issued in July 2020.

13. In **Asia-Pacific**, UN-Women developed [The First 100 Days of the COVID-19 Outbreak in Asia and the Pacific: A Gender Lens](#) providing a snapshot of the gender dimensions of the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic and offers promising practices for integrating gender perspectives in preparedness and response planning. In the **Arab States** and **Latin America and the Caribbean**, UN-Women targets major economic sectors that employ women, including tourism, hospitality, and in the informal sector through guidelines and capacity building to mitigate the risks and impact of the outbreak.

14. In **South Africa**, UN-Women, together with Google and MTN, is offering a suite of virtual learning courses to assist 4,500 women-owned businesses to apply for and access government stimulus funding. UN-Women, together with the African Development Bank and We-fi, is adjusting a joint initiative on affirmative procurement reform to support women-led production and procurement of COVID goods in **Senegal, Nigeria, Mali and Cote D'Ivoire**. [In Jordanian refugee](#)

[camps](#), UN-Women is working with the World Food Programme (WFP) to ensure direct cash-based interventions through blockchain technology and the OneCard Platform.

15. In **Asia-Pacific, Europe and Central Asia** and **Latin America and the Caribbean**, private sector signatories of the Women Economic Principles (WEPs) have been engaged to provide effective response to support gender equality in the workplace, across the value chains and throughout communities.

16. With ILO and UNICEF, UN-Women has issued guidance on [Family-friendly policies and other good workplace practices in the context of COVID-19: Key steps employers can take](#). UN-Women in **Asia Pacific** provided guidance notes addressing gender-sensitive COVID-19 responses for [women migrant workers](#), [SMEs](#), and [women in the private sector](#).

c) [People support and practice the equal sharing of the burden of care](#)

17. Overloaded health systems and school closures place a greater burden on care and domestic work. Data shows that women and girls are taking on the bulk of unpaid and poorly paid care work as formal health systems struggle to stem infections, and as child-care structures and schools face massive disruptions. The rising demand for care is likely to deepen inequalities and take disproportionate toll on health, wellbeing and economic empowerment of women and girls.

18. In response, UN-Women is working with governments across the world to advance key policy priorities on unpaid care and domestic work, namely: recognizing care workers – paid and unpaid – as essential workers and support them to carry out their work safely; expanding social protection for those with care responsibilities; providing childcare services, particularly for the children of essential workers; prioritizing access to food and basic services to alleviate unpaid care work; encouraging greater sharing of care responsibilities between women and men; putting investments in care economy at center of recovery efforts

19. UN-Women is undertaking needs assessments and development of adequate public policies; support to care workers, including domestic workers; and behaviour change communications. The [#HeForSheAtHome](#) campaign seeks to encourage men and boys to help balance the burden of care in their households.

20. UN-Women **Morocco** is working to encourage men and boys to share domestic, childcare work and home schooling with women through awareness-raising efforts. In **Latin America**, the Campaign CaringForWork in partnership with PAHO, WHO and ILO raises the visibility of women working in health and other care tasks. UN-Women and UNICEF have also partnered to produce the brief: [Promoting Positive Gender Roles in Marketing and Advertising](#) to support companies to avoid harmful stereotypes in their public communication.

21. Through the Joint Programme with ILO, UN-Women is building a policy tool for the purpose of identifying the needs in the care economy sectors (such as public health, long-term care, early childhood care and education), estimate the costs of necessary public investments for addressing these needs, and assessing the different types of economic returns in the short- and the long-run. This guide will contribute to the post-pandemic intervention packages in order to promote an effective and inclusive recovery.

d) Women lead and participate in COVID-19 response planning and decision-making

22. There are few women's voices at the [decision-making table](#) and, as a result, gender perspectives are often ignored in [responses, despite the preponderant role that women are playing in the first line of response to the crisis, saving countless lives globally](#). UN-Women prioritizes leveraging women's bargaining power by convening leaders and decision-makers to advocate for the importance of women's leadership in the response; support to women's organizations and women frontline health workers; support for women living with HIV; and awareness-campaigns and social mobilization.

23. UN-Women and the OECD convened the [Women Leaders' Virtual Roundtable on COVID-19 and the Future](#) to discuss ways of leveraging women's leadership in the COVID-19 response and recovery. At the regional level, UN-Women convened with the **African Union** a meeting of Ministers of Gender of African States to discuss gender impact of COVID19 crisis and recovery. UN-Women and the **Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean** convened high-level [meetings with Ministers](#) across the region to protect and promote women's rights as part of the crisis response.

24. Consultations with civil society organizations across **Europe and Central Asia**, covering 18 countries/territories and involving 128 women's organizations, is generating actionable policy recommendations. Support to women's organizations through UN-Women's [Women, Peace and Humanitarian Fund](#), the Spotlight Initiative and the [Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women](#) will continue and expand, though adapting to new realities that constrain movement and access.

25. Reaching populations that are marginalized or being left behind has been a consistent focus of UN-Women support. The nexus of HIV and COVID-19 brings to the fore the unique challenges facing women who are living with HIV. In **Asia and the Pacific** with UNAIDS, UN-Women is supporting networks of women living with HIV in securing uninterrupted access to HIV-related treatment, care and support. In **Nepal**, UN-Women convened 17 leaders representing women's and marginalized groups, including organizations of persons with disabilities, LGBTQI+ organizations, and *Dalit* women who strategized on key priorities and advocated with government. A platform that includes more than 30 women's organizations and partners in **the State of Palestine** was created to amplify the voices of women's organizations in COVID-19 preparedness and response plans.

26. In **Kenya**, UN-Women is training and equipping women frontline health providers with mental health and wellbeing programmes for families. In **Georgia** and **North Macedonia**, UN-Women is facilitating healthcare workers as well as caregivers with women-friendly personal protective equipment. In **China**, an UN-Women-led UN system campaign that celebrates women first-responders and raises awareness on the gendered impacts of the outbreak reached 28 million people with #AMessageToHer, and 32 million people with #GenerationEquality .

e) Data and coordination mechanisms include gender perspectives

27. UN-Women is making available technical tools and resources, such as policy briefs, gender analysis/research in emergency contexts; rapid gender assessments tools/check lists; integrating a gender perspective into response to emerging diseases; and integrating gender equality into

humanitarian action.

Data and analysis with a gender lens

28. UN-Women has placed a premium on collecting, analyzing and using timely gender data. Building on the [Women Count Gender Data Programme](#), UN-Women efforts include:

- a) primary gender sensitive data collection on the short- and medium-term impacts of COVID-19 as well as detailed population level data and analysis on longer term impacts (e.g. on poverty);
- b) evidence of how gender equality is integrated in countries' fiscal and policy responses; and
- c) building a publicly available comprehensive knowledge and database on the impact of COVID-19 on gender equality and women's rights.
- d) supporting partner to collect and use sex-disaggregated data.

29. UN-Women's COVID-19 [Dashboard](#) provides data by sex on the health impact of COVID-19 (produced in collaboration with WHO), as well as 29 gender-related SDGs indicators in 10 policy priorities needed to respond to COVID-19.

30. UN-Women is rolling out rapid assessment surveys of the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in over **30 countries in all regions**, in collaboration with national partners. [Results from the first four countries](#) (Philippines, Bangladesh, Maldives and Pakistan) show critical insights on the pandemic's negative impact is greater for women's mental health, employment and unpaid care work. Under the aegis of the Multi-Partner Trust Fund, the Women Count platform will become the "go-to" data hub by aggregating data from other UN agencies including ILO, UNICEF, UNDP and others.

Engaging in Coordination Mechanisms for Gender-Responsiveness

31. UN-Women has been working closely with UN Agencies at global, regional and country levels in the development of guidance, advocacy and policy responses to support collective efforts. Direct technical support to governments and UN partners is being provided.

32. UN-Women led the development of the UN [Policy Brief: The impact of COVID-19 on Women](#), launched by the UN Secretary-General, which demonstrates how women and girls are impacted by COVID-19 and outlines priority measures for the immediate response and longer-term recovery efforts. UN-Women has played an integral role in the development of the UNSDG report [Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19](#). Contributing significantly to the gender-responsiveness of the framework underpinning the report, UN-Women ensured that gender equality was at the core of the framework. UN-Women has contributed to a number of UN-wide issues briefs, such as [COVID-19 and Human Rights: We are all in this together](#), and the [UN Policy Brief: A Disability-inclusive Response to COVID-19](#).

33. In line with our support to women, peace and security, and in support of the [Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire](#) UN-Women has developed a policy brief focused explicitly on women's participation in ceasefires under COVID-19. UN-Women led the development of the [IASC Gender Alert](#), outlining the key gender issues and guidance for the development of strategic humanitarian preparedness and response plans.

34. Examples of UN-Women’s extensive inter-agency engagement in driving policy coherence across the UN system to address the needs of women and girls include: engagement in the Secretary-General’s Executive Committee; the Principal-level UN Crisis Management Team; the Advisory Committee of the UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF); and others. Results include for example that all 54 proposals for MPTF included the use of the gender marker and strong focus on gender analysis. In regions, UN-Women leads Issue-based Coalitions and joint UN efforts established or repurposed to respond to COVID-19.

III. Resource Mobilization and Partnerships

35. UN-Women resource mobilization priorities are demonstrating promising results. Regular resource increases and front-loading of payments are successfully supporting flexible COVID-19 responses. In 2020, increased regular resource contributions were received compared to 2019 from the Governments of Finland, Denmark, Germany and Luxembourg and approximately 13 partners advanced their regular resource payments.

36. Momentum on global and regional COVID-19 response programming is growing. UN-Women disseminated its global programme *Gender-Responsive Prevention and Management of the COVID-19 Pandemic*, budgeted at US\$70 million, which is complemented by regional programmes. The Government of Japan has confirmed US\$4.5 million to support, with discussions ongoing with various other funding partners and mechanisms. This will also be supported by income raised by UN-Women National Committees. Through the UN COVID-19 MPTF and first round of proposals, nine UN-Women country offices will receive funding totaling over US\$1.5 million.

37. UN-Women supported multi-stakeholder consultations such as the Joint Townhall of Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP on the system-wide response to COVID-19 or the UN-Women Executive Board informal briefing.

38. Moreover, UN-Women organized the first in a series of roundtables with the IFIs on “Partnering for Greater Impact: COVID-19 and Gender” with the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation, and Member States to increase the understanding of women’s needs in COVID-19 responses, the importance of applying a gender lens to COVID-19 responses and the need for gender lens in stimulus packages. Similar roundtables are being organized with the regional development banks.

39. Private sector outreach has pivoted to focus on COVID-19. UN-Women participates in the UN Emergency Private Sector Focal Point Group, focused on COVID-19; organized a virtual high-level roundtable on with WEPs signatories, key experts, including members of the Canadian and French G7 Gender Equality Advisory Council and worked with UNICEF, the Unstereotype Alliance and WEPs to develop a guidance note, [COVID-19: Promoting positive gender roles in marketing and advertising](#).

IV. Global Communications

40. UN-Women provides thought-leadership on the gendered impact of the pandemic through the

voice of the Executive Director and senior staff, as well as by disseminating up-to-date information and analysis on how and why gender matters in COVID-19 responses, coordinating with the UN system on communication efforts and amplifying messaging from the Secretary-General.

41. A total of **2,006 media articles** mentioning UN-Women and COVID have been published up to May 1st, 2020, with 46 articles or opinion pieces in top tier outlets including CNN, [BBC](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [Time Magazine](#), [The Washington Post](#), [Deutsche Welle](#), [Thomson Reuters Foundation](#), [El Pais](#), [EFE](#), [Ms. Magazine](#) and others.

42. A dedicated webpage has received **nearly 30k unique page views since publication** and social media analytics (since 18 March 2020) include total engagements of 1.4 million, and impressions totaling 56 million. Goodwill Ambassadors are sharing UN-Women crafted COVID19 messaging, through social media and video projects.

V. Impact on UN-Women's Business Continuity and Staff Well-Being

a) Strategic Re-Prioritization Exercise

43. UN-Women is undertaking a strategic reprioritization exercise that includes a complete business impact analysis in each office to identify and assess factors that could impact UN-Women's ability to deliver on the Strategic Plan, Country Strategic Notes and Annual Work Plans. The analysis, as well as early quantification of impacts, shows that 53 percent of offices experience shifts in donor priorities and thus requiring some reprogramming.³

44. In undertaking a strategic prioritization exercise to best position UN-Women to continue delivering programme results in the new context, the Entity notes that COVID-19 not only impacts on its own programmes but expects impacts on its joint programmes in 70 percent of its offices, as well as potential delays in finalizing UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCF). In the short-term, offices will be focusing on a revision of 2020 Annual Workplans (AWPs) to align each office's work with the reprioritization exercise which in the majority of the cases (54 percent of AWP) is expected to affect less than 25 percent of the AWP i.e. corresponds to a minor adjustment.

45. The reprioritization will take place within the existing envelope of regular resources and mostly relates to modifying existing outputs for COVID-19 response and prevention (71 percent of the offices), as well as adding additional outputs for COVID-19 response and prevention (54 percent). In practical terms, engagement with donors is underway to agree upon re-prioritization of funds which still support the achievement of outputs aligned with emerging priorities.

b) Staff Wellbeing

46. The COVID-19 crisis affects both work and personal life, resulting in stress, uncertainty and anxiety for many UN-Women employees. An employee well-being task team is in place with

³ Of those 53% offices that expect/observe a shift in partners' priorities at this time 33% expect delays in signing of new agreements potentially posing a risk to the Entity, while 31% only expect a reallocation of resources from existing agreements to COVID-19 related activities.

representatives from across the organization and the Staff Council. A well-being needs assessment has been conducted and will inform the development of an action plan to ensure that all UN-Women personnel, irrespective of contractual status, receive timely and satisfactory support for their well-being needs.

47. Special emphasis is placed on the prevention and response to domestic violence, which resulted in the development of guidance to address domestic abuse and other forms of gender-based violence affecting UN-Women personnel, and additional support and resources will follow.

VI. Conclusion/Next Steps

48. UN-Women has unequivocally demonstrated that the impact of COVID-19 is compounded when viewed through a gender lens. The recovery from COVID-19 can and must lead to a better and more equal, inclusive and sustainable world. UN-Women is resolved in a collective commitment and solidarity to reach this vision. To get there, the future depends on the level of intention brought to the pandemic response and efforts to move women and girls from the periphery, into the center.