

Remarks by Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, at the Joint Town Hall Meeting of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP

21 April 2020

[As delivered]

I am pleased to be part of this joint townhall, and I thank the Director-General of WHO for his presentation as well as that of the Deputy Secretary-General.

On the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls, we are looking at the scenario of an impact that is across every sphere; from health to the economy, to security, to social protection. We see COVID-19 exacerbating the poverty of women and girls.

The pandemic is threatening to reverse the gains that we have made on gender equality, modest as they have been. This year we are still saying that it is an important year for women and girls: 25 years of implementing the Beijing Platform for Action and 20 years of UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. We are trying not to lose sight of these important events, albeit under difficult circumstances.

Recently, UN Women joined hands with agencies across the entire UN System to build a clear picture of the evidence and data behind this reality. We are making sure that as we respond to COVID-19 we are building the post-pandemic world where we will have to integrate the continued implementation of the SDGs, as well as the continuation of the implementation of the Beijing+25 agenda, in order to close the remaining gaps.

You can read our report, which is the Secretary-General's Policy Brief on the *Impact of COVID-19 on Women*. I hope you have already been able to see it. In that brief, we show that the impact of COVID-19 is compounded by gender, especially for women and girls living close to poverty. No pandemic is gender-neutral and this one is no exception.

We show that women are highly represented in the health workforce. 70 per cent of the health workforce are women. This includes women on the frontlines of the response. For example women are 85 per cent of the nurses working on the frontlines. They are midwives and community health workers, and they are cleaners and cooks. We wish to salute these health workers. We note high rates of infection among women and many of them have died, while at the same time, we are very concerned that men's mortality is so high from this disease. We hope at some point the healthcare workers will be able to explain to us what makes the fatality of men be so high.

We wish to hear women's voices in this, as frontline leaders, because of their high representation. This too is an issue we wish to address as we build on Beijing+25: the participation and the role of women.

We also wish to make sure the response takes into account the views of women, because we know from the responses to the Ebola and Zika epidemics that it was a mistake to ignore women's role and participation.

Beyond health, the path of economic turbulence from COVID-19 is impacting women who are already earning less. They save less, they hold insecure jobs, and they live on the margins of society. For instance, 740 million women currently work in the informal economy, with little protection or income security. So, when we are thinking about economic stimulus, we need to ensure that these women also benefit.

The crisis will likely roll back the already tenuous gains on women's labour force participation—with devastating impacts on women's incomes. We know that in such a crisis, women don't usually die from the crisis itself, they die from the way in which the crisis is handled and their recovery takes much longer.

The global pandemic has also shown the invisible and unpaid labour of women and girls that the world's economic systems are built on. This is not sustainable. This is the time when we are putting together our response to address this in the longer term. Women's unpaid care work at home has intensified with children being out of school, and with growing numbers of elderly persons that need care. As the health system is overburdened, the care for the sick moves to the home and it becomes the job of women and girls to address this.

Life-saving care and support to survivors of violence against women is also at stake. With four billion people now sheltering at home, domestic violence has been skyrocketing. This is the 'shadow pandemic'. It was there before the COVID-19 pandemic, it is spiking during the pandemic, it will continue after. So, we need a response that goes beyond COVID-19 to make sure that we also flatten the curve of violence against women.

What we are asking of you, Member States, is to ensure that domestic violence shelters, hotlines, and services are deemed essential in every country so there is a safe passage for women who need to be taken care of and women can reach the services that they need. I was glad yesterday, when speaking to France, Colombia and Mexico, to hear that they were already doing this, and Kenya and South Africa are also doing this.

UN Women is working closely with UN Agencies at global, regional and country levels to respond to the impact of COVID-19. We are contributing to policies of social protection. We are also at regional and country levels helping HIV- positive persons to access food and testing first because their immunity is compromised. We are helping to identify women's businesses so they can get attention. We are providing dignity packs to women and girls and we are responding, obviously, to the violence of men against women.

We are part of the UN Crisis Management Team, which is led by WHO. We are also working closely with WHO to bridge the gender data gap through a dedicated COVID-19 gender statistics site in our Women Count Data Hub.

Together with ILO and UNICEF we have built key [recommendations for employers](#) to ensure workplace arrangements are family-friendly.

We welcome the UN Secretary-General's call for a [global ceasefire](#), and we are prepared to support our colleagues throughout the UN system, including DPPA, to ensure that efforts towards ceasefires are inclusive of women and that we make sure ceasefires are durable.

We have contributed extensively to the UN Development System's Socio-Economic Impact Framework to COVID-19, under the leadership of the Deputy Secretary-General. We are working also as part of the UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery Multi-Partner Trust Fund and we have an ex-officio role.

In closing, I really want to appreciate the intense collaboration that we have with colleagues throughout the UN System, the Member States, and the active role of civil society.

Thank you.