

## Making Labour Market Measures and Economic Systems Work for Women and Vulnerable Groups amid COVID-19, in Emergencies, and Building Resilience against Future Shocks

Working Paper to contribute to [High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2021](#)

### Abstract

*The 2021 high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) provides an opportune stage to address and promote the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development amid the COVID-19 battle. It also offers a platform to examine means of achievement of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development within this decade of action. Sustainable Development Goal 8, target 8.3 calls for the promotion of “development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises including through access to financial services.”*

*Persistent under-investments in gender equality and women's empowerment in the pre-COVID-19 era already hindered women's gender-equal development, and undervalued their contributions to the socio-economic development of their families and communities. As the pandemic continues, it has shifted gender dynamics and inclusivity efforts, rendering women, children, and disadvantaged groups, more exposed to deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities and pre-existing vulnerabilities. Data from UN Women (the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women) suggests that 25 years of efforts dedicated to increase gender equality are threatened by COVID-19 and progress could be wiped out.<sup>1</sup>*

*The pandemic has triggered a labour market crisis of significant proportions with a disproportionately negative effect on women, particularly those who face multiple and intersecting discrimination such as those based on class or migrant status. The impact of COVID-19 on women in the labour market has rolled back progress, particularly for those women and vulnerable groups at greatest risk of joblessness, poverty, increased inequality and who risk long-term crisis-induced socio-economic scarring. The responses in European and Central Asian countries so far have been inadequate in addressing the disproportionate impact on women and vulnerable groups, with potentially lasting effects on women's economic autonomy, poverty eradication and inequality.*

*Recovery from COVID-19 and other emergencies, as well as bolstering resilience against future shocks, can be supported with measures that increase participation of women in the labour market, secure or increase their incomes, offer opportunities to expand their livelihoods and resources, and safeguard them from productive risks. Post-COVID-19 recovery policies and efforts must carefully consider the economic inclusion of women and vulnerable groups. Labour market policy responses that include and promote diversified livelihoods and income sources can also help women and vulnerable groups withstand and cope with shocks during and after COVID-19 and build resilience to future crises. This paper provides recommendations on how member states in Europe and Central Asia can improve their responses and build more inclusive labour markets.*

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<sup>1</sup> UN Women [‘WHOSE TIME TO CARE? UNPAID CARE AND DOMESTIC WORK DURING COVID-19’](#)

*The Regional Forum on Sustainable Development (RFSD) in March 2021, organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) in partnership with UN agencies to support partners to prepare for the HLPF, prioritized the need for responses to the economic and labour market shocks from the pandemic that could accelerate gender-equal, inclusive and sustainable recovery. The RFSD recognized that “such solutions must grant everyone access to adequate social protection, strengthening delivery systems and mobilising resources;... and invest in employment-intensive sustainable infrastructure and enterprises, including digital infrastructure and green technology...”*

## I. Background

It has now been over one year since the COVID-19 outbreak triggered significant social and economic disruptions. With 178.8 million confirmed cases and close to 3.9 million deaths globally<sup>2</sup> (as of 24 June 2021), the pandemic has placed extreme pressure on global health and care systems, exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, and exposed vulnerabilities in labour and economic systems, with immediate and longer-term implications for women and vulnerable groups. While women and girls have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 economic fallout, those who are disadvantaged based on income, age, race, geographical location, migration status, disability, sexual orientation, and health status have been particularly affected and are most at risk of being left behind. They are also excluded from opportunities to recover and expand their livelihoods, and safeguard themselves from future risks.

COVID-19 has engendered profound social and economic disruption to global labour markets and supply chains. Businesses in Europe and Central Asia have been forced to close or scale back their operations to comply with social distancing and lockdown or partial-lockdown measures to curb the spread of the virus and its variants. The ensuing plummet of economic activity has led to millions of people losing their jobs, livelihoods, and incomes. This has particularly affected women and vulnerable groups, with profound implications on social, economic, physical, and mental wellbeing.

The UN Women analysis of the impacts of COVID-19 on gender equality in Europe and Central Asia underlined that “the more acute economic impacts of the pandemic on women reflect long-standing gender disparities in access to economic resources and opportunities across the ECA region.” The analysis pointed to women’s access to decent work and economic empowerment as a priority for the pandemic recovery period. Along with emergency support for women entrepreneurs, longer-term measures are needed to remove barriers to their work. Priority should also be given to young women, especially those who are neither educated nor economically active, to enable them to find decent, skilled work and prevent them from falling further behind.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst a range of labour market measures have been introduced or expanded by governments in Europe and Central Asia since the start of the pandemic to support businesses and workers’ jobs, wages, and incomes, more must be done to address and distinct gendered impacts on the economic security of women and men that are widening the socio-economic divide. Measures must support women’s access to decent work (including to enter or to re-enter employment), as well as opportunities for entrepreneurship and economic empowerment in the COVID-19 response and recovery.

This paper recommends specific support for women and other vulnerable groups, and suggests that greater gender responsiveness in policy-making is crucial for women and girls to ‘weather the crisis, bounce back and rebuild,’ and facilitates sustainable longer-term change.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [WHO Coronavirus Disease \(COVID-19\) Dashboard](#)

<sup>3</sup> UN Women (2021) [Assessing the lights and shadows of COVID-19: A gender analysis of pandemic-related impacts on women and girls in Europe and Central Asia](#)

<sup>4</sup> UN Women (2020) [From Insight to Action: Gender Equality in the Wake of COVID-19](#)

## II. Impact of COVID-19 on Labour Market and its Gender Dimensions

The “**feminized sectors**” of the labour market, including tourism, retail and food and accommodation have been hardest hit during the pandemic because their workers have been less likely to work from home. Those employed in the informal sector, predominantly as domestic workers, have also been adversely affected by the pandemic. Such sectors are typically characterised by low pay, temporary work contracts, poor working conditions and limited employment rights. The unprecedented job losses in feminised sectors of employment, reduced working hours, the need to give up paid work to care for children out of school or sick family members, coupled with low savings, large debt, and limited or no access to social protection safety nets, have meant that many women and vulnerable groups have been unable to support themselves or their families.<sup>5</sup> The World Bank estimates that in the Europe and Central Asia region an additional six million people may slip into poverty.<sup>6</sup> This has a particular impact in Central Asian countries, such as Tajikistan, that rely on remittances for income.<sup>7</sup> Strong gender focused planning and policy initiatives, and data disaggregated by multiple dimensions of inequality have long been advocated by activists and women’s organisations. Such efforts are pivotal to ensure that women’s labour market and economic interests are given priority in both short- and long-term responses to the pandemic. Immediate government measures should include support due to lost income, and reconciling unpaid care responsibilities with paid employment during the pandemic. Longer-term planning and policies on recovery and resilience should include job creation, equitable wage setting, and revaluing of care work.

Women have endured an intensification of **unpaid care and household work**<sup>8</sup> from increased care obligations for those suffering from the virus, and heightened care needs of older persons, disabled or vulnerable family members due to closures of formal social and health services and schools. The interrelationship between gender, unpaid work and paid employment has long been recognised by feminist activists and scholars. COVID-19 has made apparent the significance of care to social and economic life. Since the start of the pandemic, unpaid care work has intensified, disproportionately affecting women, and particularly low paid and vulnerable groups. More women than men across the globe have reported more time spent on household chores and unpaid care work while juggling paid employment. This has placed additional physical and mental burdens on women and vulnerable groups. In Europe and Central Asia, 70 percent of women reported that since the start of the crisis they have spent more time on at least one unpaid domestic chore compared to 59 percent of men.<sup>9</sup> The highest burden was reported by women in Georgia (62 percent, compared to 43 percent for men) and Albania (72 versus 61 percent) - both countries had early school closures - as well as Kyrgyzstan (67 and 26 percent).<sup>10</sup> The COVID-19 crisis has reinforced the importance of reducing, redistributing and revaluing unpaid work for women’s labour market participation and their social and economic empowerment.

Since the start of the pandemic and ensuing economic crisis, **women’s paid employment** has been more at risk than men’s, with women losing their jobs at a greater speed than men.<sup>11</sup> Data for Europe and Central Asia indicate that a higher share of job losses were reported by women than men: for Kazakhstan (26 versus 22 percent); Turkey (19 versus 14 percent); and Bosnia and Herzegovina (13 versus 8 percent).<sup>12</sup> Women’s working hours were also more likely to have decreased, with over 40 percent of women in the region doing less paid work during the early months of the pandemic. The highest gender gap in relation to decreased working hours was in Azerbaijan. As the pandemic unfolded in some countries within Europe and Central Asia, millions of migrant workers who lost their jobs in the informal sector were forced to leave cities that were seen as epicentres for COVID-19, and return to rural areas, which adversely affected both workers and families reliant on remittances. The pandemic hit hard in parts of Eastern Europe and Central Asia where women are dominant in the informal sector as family workers in farming or family-businesses, and

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<sup>5</sup> Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI) (2020) [Theme 1: protecting workers’ rights through the Covid-19 crisis](#)

<sup>6</sup> World Bank (2020) [Fighting Poverty in Europe and Central Asia](#)

<sup>7</sup> UNDP (2020) [COVID-19 and Central Asia: Socio-economic impacts and key policy considerations for recovery](#)

<sup>8</sup> UN (2020) [Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women](#)

<sup>9</sup> UN Women (2020) [Women at the forefront of COVID-19 response in Europe and Central Asia](#)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> ILO (2020) [A gender-responsive employment recovery: Building back fairer](#)

<sup>12</sup> UN Women (2020) [Women at the forefront of COVID-19 response in Europe and Central Asia](#)

as market traders or street vendors. For those who relied on public space and social interactions to earn money, COVID-19 limited their livelihood opportunities. Government income replacement measures have been essential for such workers' survival.

Among women and vulnerable groups, **self-employed women and women's MSMEs** have suffered dramatically. Those enterprises have closed more frequently due to women's reduced access to capital, lack of business networks and the additional burden of unpaid work at home. Figures indicate that 25 percent of self-employed women in the region have lost their jobs during the pandemic<sup>13</sup>, compared to 21 percent of self-employed men. Particularly affected have been self-employed women in Kazakhstan (81 percent), Azerbaijan (80 percent), Turkey (82 percent), Kosovo (78 percent) and Kyrgyzstan (77 percent). Women-owned businesses are often reliant on self-financing, and women experience gender discrimination in access to funding. For example, while the government in Albanian has taken broad measures to provide economic support to different groups, many female heads-of-households and rural women remain excluded from these schemes, as almost 90 percent of rural family businesses are registered in men's names.<sup>14</sup> More targeted and innovative support is required for women's enterprises and the self-employed.

With social distancing requirements and the closure of education and childcare institutions, there has been an unprecedented shift to **flexibility in working arrangements**, especially for home working. Such measures were discussed as ways to increase the family-friendliness of working arrangements and support women's empowerment, but implementation was previously slow and inconsistent. While working from home has become a reality for almost half of women and a quarter of men<sup>15</sup> in Europe and Central Asia, it is generally men and women working in white-collar and high-skilled occupations, living in urban settings that have benefitted most from such working arrangements compared to those in low paid and informal jobs. Poor digital infrastructure, limited digital skills and a simple lack of space have created practical obstacles to home working for many women, particularly those from vulnerable groups.

### **III. How Governments in the Region Have Responded to COVID-19's Disproportionate Economic Fallout on Women and Vulnerable Groups**

Across all 18 countries and territories in Europe and Central Asia<sup>16</sup> multiple measures were introduced by governments to tackle the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19. The approaches fell largely into three categories: social protection, labour market, and economic and fiscal. UN Women's research study, ***ONE YEAR OF COVID-19: A Gender Analysis of Emergency COVID-19 Socio-Economic Policy Responses Adopted in Europe and Central Asia***, offers an analysis of government measures under these dimensions, taken from a gender lens<sup>17</sup> and the Leave No One Behind (LNOB) principle.<sup>18</sup> In applying these perspectives, governments can mitigate the adverse and disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on women and vulnerable groups, while bolstering the fundamentals in 'building back better' after the pandemic. The **ONE YEAR OF COVID-19** study documents reported emergency measures available from multiple data sources including the International Monetary Fund,<sup>19</sup> World Bank,<sup>20</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> UN Women (2020) [Across Europe and Central Asia, women confront economic impacts of the pandemic](#)

<sup>15</sup> UN Women (2020) [Women at the forefront of COVID-19 response in Europe and Central Asia](#)

<sup>16</sup> Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Turkey, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo (All references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in full compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999))

<sup>17</sup> Gender lens methodology: measures that are gender-sensitive, include explicit reference to "women" and "seek to directly address the risks and challenges that women and girls face during the COVID-19 crisis" ([COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker Methodological note](#))

<sup>18</sup> Leave No One Behind (LNOB) principle methodology: measures that directly address and make explicit reference to vulnerable and marginalized households and groups

<sup>19</sup> [IMF Policy Tracker on Policy Responses to COVID-19](#)

<sup>20</sup> [World Bank Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures](#)

Development,<sup>21</sup> Council of Europe,<sup>22</sup> the International Labour Organization<sup>23</sup> and the UNDP-UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker.<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that the findings “should be interpreted with caution... there may be gaps or biases due to a lack of available information, underreporting of measures being announced, overreporting of measures that have been suspended, or the lack of data on the gender components of existing measures.”<sup>25</sup> Also, with the use of multiple sources, the numbers presented may differ from the UNDP-UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker.

Across the region a total of 477 social protection, labour market and economic and fiscal measures were recorded in the first year of the pandemic. Under these dimensions, only 7 percent have been gender-sensitive in that they make specific reference to “women” while 28 percent are inclusive of the LNOB principle in that they make specific reference to vulnerable and marginalized households and groups. Presented by region and sub-regions, these measures can be summarised in the following table.

*Gender-sensitive and LNOB measures introduced by governments to tackle COVID-19’s socio-economic impacts under three dimensions: social protection, labour market, and economic and fiscal*

<b>By Region and Sub-region</b>	<b>Social protection measures</b>	<b>Labour market measures</b>	<b>Economic and fiscal measures</b>	<b>TOTAL measures</b>	<b>Gender-sensitive measures</b>	<b>LNOB measures</b>
<b>Europe and Central Asia</b>	<b>220 (46%)</b>	<b>82 (17%)</b>	<b>175 (37%)</b>	<b>477</b>	<b>34 (7%)</b>	<b>135 (28%)</b>
Central Asia	40 (48%)	12 (15%)	31 (37%)	<b>83</b>	3 (4%)	29 (35%)
Eastern Partnership	100 (48%)	34 (16%)	75 (36%)	<b>209</b>	13 (6%)	58 (28%)
Western Balkans and Turkey	80 (43%)	36 (20%)	69 (37%)	<b>185</b>	18 (10%)	48 (26%)

*Source: UN Women (2021) ONE YEAR OF COVID-19: A Gender Analysis of Emergency COVID-19 Socio-Economic Policy Responses Adopted in Europe and Central Asia*

With 7 percent overall gender-sensitive measures recorded across the three dimensions (social protection, labour market, and economic and fiscal), a particularly low proportion of government emergency responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have addressed women’s economic support and security. These findings are consistent with the UNDP-UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker in that “measures that target women’s economic security and address unpaid care make up only a fraction of the total social protection and labour market response, on the one hand, and the fiscal and economic response, on the other.”<sup>26</sup> In comparison to the LNOB methodology on measures that directly address and make explicit reference to vulnerable and marginalized households and groups, LNOB measures recorded across the three dimensions in Europe and Central Asia, are four times more than gender-sensitive measures, implying a greater number of government measures covered urgent social, labour and economic needs of vulnerable groups.

Of the 82 labour market measures, 7 percent of these have been gender-sensitive. Under salary assistance to employed persons, only 9 percent of measures cited wages support to employed “women” and self-employed “women”, while 4 percent of labour regulatory adjustments and reinforcements explicitly referenced “women.” Georgia introduced one-time assistance to people employed in the informal sector

<sup>21</sup> [OECD POLICY TRACKER: Tackling COVID-19 - Contributing to a global effort](#)

<sup>22</sup> [Council of Europe: Promoting and protecting women’s rights at national level](#)

<sup>23</sup> [ILO Country Policy Responses](#)

<sup>24</sup> [UNDP- UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker](#)

<sup>25</sup> [COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker Methodological note](#)

<sup>26</sup> [UNDP- UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker: Factsheet 1](#)

or the self-employed. The decision to support non-formal employees was reported as indirectly targeted to provide social assistance to “women.” Serbia offered a 10 percent increase in salary of care workers in nursing homes and reported this as a sector which represents a larger number of “women” workers. Uzbekistan’s labour adjustments introduced new work arrangements allowing employees - and cited “pregnant women” - to benefit from remote and flexible work arrangements.

Of the 220 social protection measures, 9 percent have been gender-sensitive. Within this dimension, 17 percent of unpaid care work measures have been gender-sensitive calling for more public investments in the care economy. Georgia expanded support schemes for families where the needs of “women” were cited as the ones often taking the largest load of care work. Georgia’s social compensation mentioned “women” as income-earners rendered jobless and as a parent of children with disabilities, and part of families with 3 or more children. With the unprecedented job losses, only 4 percent extended and expanded unemployment benefits with explicit mention of “women” in unemployment schemes. Albania doubled payments to those who receive unemployment benefits, and for “women” under their economic aid scheme, while Armenia introduced one-time financial assistance to “single pregnant women,” to “women” who were not employed and to those whose husbands lost their jobs.

Of the 175 economic and fiscal measures, only 5 percent have been gender-sensitive in that they cited targeted support to feminized sectors of their economy. That is, sectors that absorb a higher proportion of women’s employment compared to that of men and to “women-run businesses/entrepreneurs.” Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kosovo targeted the feminized sectors of employment facing financial difficulties due to the pandemic with measures in sectors explicitly having higher percentages of “women’s employment” or “female employment.” Armenia introduced a three-year SME loans to companies including from the health and social work sector which account for 8.4 percent of women's employment, which is 6.7 percent more than men’s employment in the same sectors. Also, individuals and legal entities working in the agricultural sector were provided with loans (co-financing and/or loan/leasing interest rate subsidies) where agriculture accounts for 32 percent of women’s employment compared to 26 percent of men’s employment. Kazakhstan provided credit support to SMEs for select sectors including wholesale and retail trade which represents 18 percent of women's employment and 10.8 percent of men's employment. Interest-free loans were provided to publicly-owned enterprises in Kosovo where public sector employment represents 47.8 percent of female employment and 33.4 percent of male employment. Lastly, gender-sensitive business and entrepreneurship stimulus measures were recorded from 5 countries. Bosnia and Herzegovina cited “business activities of women” as recipients to access financial funds for MSMEs; Georgia reported that some pre-conditions and application barriers were removed to allow more “women-run businesses” to apply for small grants and economic programmes; Moldova cited “women entrepreneurs” as grantees under an approved draft law to implement the Interest Grant Program to support businesses/ entrepreneurs; North Macedonia mentioned “companies run or founded by women” as recipients of a 30 percent non-refundable grant; and Turkey announced a grant programme for “women cooperatives” under their Cooperatives Support Programme.

While some governments have taken positive measures to address women’s economic security and rights amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the examples above underscore that the response remains grossly insufficient and not nearly enough has been done to mitigate the negative economic impacts of COVID-19 on women and vulnerable groups. This paper puts forward the case for more and deliberate actions using both the gender and LNOB lenses to close the gender disproportionate economic fallout from COVID-19.



#### IV. Recommendations to Improve the Emergency Response (short term) and Build More Inclusive Labour Markets (medium/long term)

Immediate responses by governments to the COVID-19 pandemic have focused on curbing the spread of the virus and tackling urgent social and economic needs. Across Europe and Central Asia, labour market measures were introduced or adapted by governments to support the social and economic impacts of the crisis. Yet, the pandemic has also highlighted the need for wider and longer-term changes or reforms to labour, employment, care, and market systems, along with supportive macroeconomic policy reforms to ensure fairness and resilience to future crises.<sup>27</sup> Analysis by UN Women shows a paucity of labour market interventions that were designed with a gendered lens, and only a few include measures specifically targeting women.<sup>28</sup>

##### Immediate responses

1. **Maintain momentum of emergency and immediate labour market interventions and implement new and practical schemes that reach beyond formal employment.** COVID-19 immediate labour market policy interventions have focused on supporting business, workplace safety, and measures to prevent social hardship. Many of the interventions have taken the form of job retention schemes offering support in salary and wages to employed and self-employed persons and to business owners. While such schemes have prevented surges in unemployment and mitigated financial hardships for those working reduce hours, it is important that such schemes are not downscaled prematurely or too quickly during emergencies and crises. In addition, governments need to reach beyond formal employment to ensure they are helping women and vulnerable groups in all spheres of work. This includes those in informal and precarious employment, many of whom are migrant women who do not benefit from labour regulations or protections and are not covered by job retention schemes.
2. **Provide more specific and targeted support for women's MSMEs.** Measures should include easing tax burdens, providing specific grants and stimulus funding, as well as subsidized and state-backed loans for businesses owned and led by women and vulnerable groups. Universal monetary disbursements related to paid care leave and additional family-related benefits can help ensure family income security for self-employed women or women-led enterprises. Moreover, labour market policies should be revised to ensure protection for formal and informal employment, including women's entrepreneurship and unpaid work. As part of targeted support, governments, businesses, trade unions and individuals must collaborate in the engagement and economic development of women entrepreneurs and business owners, including those from vulnerable populations.
3. **Offer flexible working arrangements including parental leave for both women and men.** Flexible working arrangements including parental leave must be made available for both women and men. All workers must be able to access such working arrangements without losing pay or hindering their career or job progression. The relaxing of existing labour restrictions around working conditions, occupational safety, and health requirements in home offices need more formal and expansive regulatory frameworks.
4. **Target and expand digital support and resources for women and vulnerable groups at risk of exclusion.** ICT solutions should be used to promote gender equality and women's empowerment and expand access to new business opportunities. The expanded use of online tools can enable women to manage their own businesses. In addition, ICT support, training and resources must be offered to allow women to manage their own finances and increase their access to, and availability of, banking services through mobile banking.

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<sup>27</sup> UN Women (2020) [COVID-19 and the Care Economy: Immediate action and structural transformation for a gender-responsive recovery](#)

<sup>28</sup> UN Women (2020) [Addressing the Economic Fallout of COVID-19: Pathways and Policy Options For A Gender-Responsive Recovery](#)

5. **Integrate gender analysis, gender and intersectional data, and rapid assessment data into pandemic responses and policies.** Gaps in data availability have left many COVID-19-related questions unanswered regarding the different impacts of the pandemic on varying groups of people. This is particularly important given that women and vulnerable groups have been uniquely affected during the crisis, particularly women led MSMEs or MSMEs and sectors dominated by women.

### Medium- to longer-term responses

1. **Focus on improving women's access to decent employment.** This must be accompanied by gender responsive budgeting and fiscal measures to support implementation. This involves a commitment to capacity building and investing in gender-responsive policy-making, including inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms to strengthen labour-related measures in emergencies and planning for future crises. Labour and employment laws and policies should be revised to protect all types of employment, including entrepreneurship and unpaid work. A gender perspective should be applied across all policy, decision-making, and longer-term planning to counter deeply engrained gender-based discrimination. Essential to these changes are improved national data disaggregated by gender and other dimensions of inequality.
2. **Commit to strengthening the 'real economy', including urgent investment in the care economy<sup>29</sup>.** Public investments are important in the "triple dividend" they promise in terms of job creation, enabling women to (re)enter the labour market and strengthening the capabilities of children and care-dependent adults. Such investment not only has the potential to create 'decent' and 'greener' jobs for both women and men, especially when accompanied by improved pay and working conditions, but to reduce unemployment and redress deeply embedded gender inequalities by valuing and supporting care work.<sup>30</sup> As an example, a study conducted by UN Women examines the employment-generating and fiscal effects of investing in universal childcare in the Republic of North Macedonia.<sup>31</sup> The study calculates the total annual costs of investing in childcare services that would increase the enrolment (coverage) rate of the children in formal childcare services to different target levels. Examples of benefits in investment in the care economy: "The employment rate of women would increase by between 2.6 and 6.2 percentage points. In the high-quality universal scenario, the gender employment gap would be reduced by more than a fifth from 20.2 percent to 15.8 percent (among 15-64 age group)"; "With increased employment and earnings come increased fiscal revenue from income tax, social security contributions and expenditure (consumption) taxes, which would almost halve the net annual funding requirement of the investment." Under the "scenario of universal enrolment and high-quality provision, the annual net funding requirement is 1.6 percent of GDP for a gross investment of 3.2 percent of GDP."
3. **Reduce, recognise, and redistribute women's disproportionate responsibilities for unpaid work.** While unprecedented measures to address the economic fallout from COVID-19 have been taken, few approaches have been directed at supporting unpaid workers and paid workers who are juggling home care needs. Community groups, media and public campaigns can do more to promote the equitable distribution of care and domestic work between men and women and encourage fathers to undertake their fair share of childcare. Both paid and unpaid care workers must be recognised as essential workers.
4. **Remove barriers that thwart women's job protection, access to unemployment, social benefits, and basic services.** Occupational segregation and barriers, such as lack of access to land, capital, financial resources, and technology, make it more difficult for women to gain equal footing with men in labour

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<sup>29</sup> More detailed analysis is presented in "[UNECE - UN Women series: Rethinking care economy and empowering women for building back better](#)"

<sup>30</sup> UN Women (2020) [COVID-19 and the Care Economy: Immediate action and structural transformation for a gender-responsive recovery](#).

<sup>31</sup> UN Women (2020) [Investing in free universal childcare in the Republic of North Macedonia: Analysis of costs, short-term employment effects and fiscal revenue](#)



and business markets. Gender inequality is compounded by legal barriers and gender differences in labour laws, such as those that prevent women from working in specific jobs, or lack of laws that protect against sexual harassment. Extending support to informal workers including migrants is essential to improving the well-being of women as they are dominant in the informal sector. Expanded access to affordable and quality public childcare services will allow more women and vulnerable groups to participate in the labour force. Bridging the gender pay gap is also urgent, ensuring laws and policies are enacted that guarantee equal pay for work of equal value.

5. **Develop policies to protect employment, offer jobs training, education and apprenticeships to women, informal workers, and small business entrepreneurs most impacted by COVID-19.** Targeted fiscal support could help speed up the recovery in the “feminised” sectors of tourism, hospitality, and food. This could take the form of medium-term tax cuts or extended credit from banks.<sup>32</sup> Micro-finance Institutions also have an important and creative role to play and could offer bridging funds and appropriate financial instruments to support self-employed women and small business owners. Governments, businesses, trade unions and individuals all need to be involved to support the economic development, education and training and engagement of women entrepreneurs and business owners.
6. **Develop ICT solutions to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment.** This means ensuring equal access to new business and training programmes, including opportunities for women to become entrepreneurs and investors in the new digital economy, and in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Increased connectivity and access to technologies can help improve women and girls’ access to health, education, financial and other public services, as well as their participation in decision-making, which can transform their lives. The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated that digital tools have been essential for many people, businesses, and workers. Yet, those excluded from the digital world are at risk of being left behind through limited digital access and digital illiteracy.

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<sup>32</sup> UN Women (2020) [Addressing the Economic Fallout of COVID-19: Pathways and Policy Options For A Gender-Responsive Recovery](#)