



IN FOCUS

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## WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND COVID-19: A SNAPSHOT OF UN WOMEN RESPONSE IN THE ARAB STATES



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The COVID-19 pandemic is putting an unprecedented and significant strain on the global economy and public health systems. It is also highlighting, and magnifying inequalities and the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by women and girls. The pandemic has moved beyond a global health crisis and has morphed into a labour market, social and economic crisis, posing a serious threat to women's employment and livelihoods, especially in precarious informal and non-essential sectors.

In the current context, it is vital to adopt short and longer-term solutions to mitigate economic losses and the adverse impact on women's livelihoods during the pandemic in order to position them for economic recovery during and in the aftermath of the pandemic.

In the short term, it is critical to stabilize economic losses of women during the pandemic, protect their employment where possible and reconcile their work obligations with increased burden of care work at home due to closed schools and caring for the sick and elderly.

For the longer term, it is essential to establish and strengthen macroeconomic policies that channel resources to those most impacted by the crisis and provide social and economic recovery support and other productive resources in the economy in order to benefit women and girls.

In the Arab region alone, ESCWA estimates a USD 42 billion decline in GDP as a result of COVID-19, and the loss of 1.7 million jobs in 2020 with nearly 700,000 jobs lost for women. As women are encouraged to remain out of the work force through taking on longer term domestic duties of care and education, their jobs will likely to be disproportionately affected by lay-offs, and result in a prolonged dip in women's engagement in the paid economy.

This reaffirms that this crisis poses a serious threat to women's engagement in economic activities, which is likely to further increase staggering gender gaps in livelihoods and labour force participation in the region.

Some of the effects include<sup>1</sup>:

- **Impacts on women's economic empowerment.** This crisis poses a serious threat to women's engagement in economic activities in general, but especially in informal sector daily workers, and economic sectors that are hit hard by the

<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 Outbreak and Gender: Key Advocacy Points from Asia and the Pacific: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/giha\\_wg\\_advocacy\\_brief\\_covid\\_19\\_outbreak\\_and\\_gender.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/giha_wg_advocacy_brief_covid_19_outbreak_and_gender.pdf)

pandemic. This is likely to increase gender gaps in livelihoods and labour force participation, already showing staggering numbers in the Arab states.

- **The mass shutdown of childcare centres and schools** across the region has left many working parents with little choice but to take time off, or to try to work from home while caring for their children. This practice was supported by national policies and institutional and social practices. The closing of schools affects women particularly because much of the responsibility for childcare still falls on them. Flexible working arrangements leave women with the responsibility of carrying out unpaid care work, even for working parents, which affects women's productivity due to double burden.
- **Increased burden of unpaid care work on women and girls.** As health systems become stretched with the outbreak of the COVID 19, many people with COVID-19 will need to be cared for at home, adding to women's overall burden, as well as putting them at greater risk of becoming infected. As statistics show, women perform three to five times more care work than men.
- **Impacts on women migrant workers.** Women migrant workers, many of whom are daily workers who face the risk of losing their source of income, in particular those engaged in domestic and care work, have called attention to the adverse impact of increasingly unpredictable travel bans on their employment, with strong adverse financial implications and ability to support their families.
- **Meeting the needs of women healthcare workers.** Women constitute 70% of the workers in the health and social sector globally,<sup>2</sup> and are on the frontlines of the response. Within this sector, an average gender pay gap of 28% exists, which may be exacerbated in times of crises. Women healthcare workers have called attention to their specific needs beyond personal protective equipment, including to meet menstrual hygiene needs. Psychosocial support should also be provided to frontline responders.
- **Need for targeted approaches to reaching all social groups** including women and girls with disabilities with risk of lack of proper communication and services.
- **All in all, women are playing an indispensable role in the fight against the outbreak** - as health care workers, teachers, as scientists and researchers, as social mobilisers, as community peace builders and connectors, and as caregivers.

## Key Strategies for UN Women interventions on Women Economic Empowerment:

### General Interventions:

- **Women's SMEs:** Assessing impacts on women owned SME's. This will highlight the main challenges facing entrepreneurs in face of the outbreak of COVID-19 and will provide data on the effective strategies to support women led small businesses on business continuity and recovery plans. Including women-owned businesses in the national recovery plan post COVID-19. Developing women business owners' capacity to develop a business plan to help their businesses survive.
- **Private sector:** Engaging the private sector companies in supporting women led businesses to build their capacities on recovery plans. Enforcing flexible work arrangements and provide technical monitoring support to protect women's and men's labour rights.
- **Women in the informal sector:** Assessing the toll of this pandemic and other global events on women working in the informal sector and addressing their needs to develop effective strategies.

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<sup>2</sup> WHO (2019). Gender equity in the health work force: Analysis of 104 countries.

- **Cash transfer programmes:** Developing targeted women's economic empowerment strategies, including cash transfer programming, to mitigate the impact of the outbreak and its containment measures including supporting them to recover and build resilience for future shocks.
- **Policy making processes and advocacy:** Call on the economic stability and resilience for women-headed households through business coping strategies. Raising women's awareness about their rights and national measures taken to face the outbreak. Advocating for national women machineries' inclusion in policy making to ensure women's voice is heard and reflected in the national policies to face and recover from the pandemic.
- **Women's Employability:** Ensuring that women have the necessary skills to respond the changing labor market needs amid the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic through forming partnerships with specialized training centers/firms to build the capacities of potential women software developers in an accelerated manner to correspond to the rising demands in the ICT sector as well as deliver career development and employability trainings to young women in emerging growing sectors such as e-commerce, ICT, healthcare and food processing and retail.

### Women Empowerment Principles and COVID-19:

- [Private sector needs to play key role in economic recovery programmes.](#) The Women Empowerment Principles (WEPs) are the entry point for [private sector companies to ensure their policies are gender sensitive](#) and support families at this critical time through providing flexible work arrangements for women and remote arrangements and protecting jobs of women where possible.
- Working with WEPs signatories on initiating a platform to bring together companies and help organize initiatives to address impact of the current pandemic on women led businesses.
- Launching an advocacy campaign targeting the private sector on the business efficacy of WEPs in the economic recovery during and post crisis.
- Assessing the feasibility of launching regional COVID-19 response fund to address emerging needs of women led businesses to help them survive through this pandemic.
- Supporting employees with online guidance and training on remote working arrangements and processes.
- Considering paying "hazard pay" to workers in the service industry (a majority of whom are women) to cover at a minimum medical insurance.
- Strengthen accountability mechanisms for the private sector. The gender equality strategies may also include guidelines on risk assessments and business continuity plans to mitigate the impact of the current and any global events.
- Taking into consideration the physical, mental and emotional health of all employees including women with disabilities and be aware that the risk to domestic violence increases with women being confined to home. This include setting up a hotline for employees.

## Snapshot of Country-level Response on WEE and COVID-19:

### EGYPT

- Working with the Egyptian National Council for Women on counseling to victims of violence as result of the outbreak and stress on the families.
- Supporting the NCW in developing a monitoring report on the status of women post COVID-19, especially the measures taken by the government in this regard.
- Producing a brief on “women’s needs and gender equality in Egypt’s COVID-19 response”.
- Working on providing cash assistance to women especially in the informal sector through supporting the Ministry of Social Solidarity’s “Takaful programme”.
- Developing a cash transfer programme to migrants and refugees without access to health care or social insurance.
- Data collection on the impact of COVID 19 on women in general, including assessment on women led businesses (MSMEs) through a mobile survey.
- Assessing and highlighting responses of the private sector and WEPs signatories on COVID-19.
- Liaising with CSOs and NGOs on collecting information and areas of collaboration to respond to women’s needs post COVID 19.
- Cooperating with the private sector on developing action plans and supporting women in marginalized communities with PPE (sanitizers, masks, soaps)
- Conducting awareness campaigns on family-friendly policies and other good workplace practices in the context of COVID-19.
- Supporting the Technology Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center (TIEC) of Ministry of Information and Communication Technology with the digitization of its entrepreneurship training program to women entrepreneurs to sustain their access to entrepreneurship educational content during the pandemic and beyond.
- Providing technical (development of online platforms, consultancy support) and financial support to women-led businesses (Micro, Very Small and Small Businesses) in partnership with NCW and Ministry of Trade and Industry.
- Supporting digital and financial inclusion efforts with the promotion of mobile banking and e-wallets especially those targeted towards irregular women workers.
- Supporting the delivery of career development and employability trainings to young women in emerging growing sectors such as e-commerce, ICT, healthcare and food processing & retail. Providing specialized training centers/firms to build the capacities of potential women software developers in an accelerated manner to correspond to the rising demands in the ICT sector.

### JORDAN

- Undertaking an assessment on the impact of macroeconomic policies from a gender perspective as result of the pandemic.
- With their partners NGOs, UN Women are developing a survey to target small and medium companies owned by women to assess the impact on their businesses and their ability to sustain.

- Together with UNDP and ILO, a large-scale survey is being developed to assess the impact of COVID 19 on small, medium and large companies.
- UN Women are currently working with partners from UN agencies and NCW on an analysis study on the impact of COVID 19 on women in different sectors.

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## PALESTINE

- Undertaking number of flash surveys on entrepreneurs and women in informal sector.
- Conducting household survey on sharing responsibilities.
- Assessing the impact of COVID 19 on women employment in number of sectors to map issues concerning women in tourism, restaurants and informal sector.

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## LEBANON

- Working with partners to re-align training programmes to be partially virtual and to provide all payments for women beneficiaries related to transportation allowance to facilitate access to cash for women also considering their day care for children and elderly as paid care work.
- Re-alignment of activities to be COVID-19 responsive: distribution of food items, distribution of hygiene boxes and dignity kits for women and hygiene materials to the community centers, possibility of engaging women who finalized sewing courses to start working on production of PPEs, establishment of community kitchens to provide free meals to communities at risk of being left behind, and cash for work payments for women who finalized cooking and catering training.
- UN Women in collaboration with Global Compact Network Lebanon is conducting a virtual workshop with Women's Empowerment Principles signatories related to WEE & COVID-19, as a response to address women's needs within COVID-19, address the protection needs for women at work place, and identifying WEPs champions in COVID-19 response.

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## MOROCCO

- As part of the government's response to assist vulnerable citizens who lost their income due to the crisis, women who have lost their jobs are registered with social security and those registered under the national RAMEH health coverage plan will receive/are receiving cash assistance. Women who work in the informal sector will also receive a financial assistance. This is particularly important since about 50% of women's employment is unpaid (2/3 are women working in rural areas) and 70% are in low or unskilled jobs.
- UN Women will be conducting a web-based survey which will look, amongst other things, at potential change in employment status and financial burdens/status due to COVID-19.
- On the topic of the increased burden of domestic and family responsibilities during the confinement period, UN Women is working on launching a sensitization campaign on positive paternities/masculinities in order to engage men and boys in actively participating in domestic and family responsibilities and ensure a lower percentage of women's job loss.

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## TUNISIA

- Implementation of online training for women's economic empowerment.
- Relaunching the national plan to involve women in the private sector during and after COVID 19 (with banks and companies).

- Supporting women's economic initiatives with UNDP during COVID 19. Launching innovation challenges in the three governorates to finance 6 initiatives made by women in response to COVID-19 and that meet the needs of their cities during this period.
- Accelerating the adoption of the social and solidarity economy law with a gender approach, in middle term.

## LIBYA

- UN Women conducted a [flash, online survey](#) to capture the impact of COVID 19 on women, with the support of the Libyan Women's Peacebuilding Network. The survey also included individual women as well as national institutions and civil society organisations from a variety of geographical areas in Libya to understand the COVID-19 preparedness and response plans from a gender perspective. Sixty per cent of the sampled women feared the outcome of the lockdown arrangements, including the financial difficulties that the families would face.
- Developing programmes that focus on supporting women's self-employment and business start-up while combating stereotypes about women's roles to promote women's engagement in the private sector and "non-traditional" fields.
- Ensuring that future projects, operations and initiatives to stabilise Libya mainstream gender equality and women's empowerment through shedding light on gender stereotypes and restrictions that prevent women from reaching their potential in contributing to critical economic activities in Libya and alleviate the domestic burden shaped by gendered stereotypes.



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