

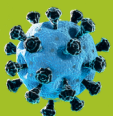
THE *LANCET* COVID-19 COMMISSION
TASK FORCE ON HUMANITARIAN RELIEF,
SOCIAL PROTECTION & VULNERABLE GROUPS

**Women and Gender Issues:
Policy and Practice
Recommendations for the
Pandemic and Post-COVID Era**

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THE *LANCET*
COVID-19 COMMISSION

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OVERVIEW

COVID-19 has disproportionately affected women and girls. The crisis of domestic violence and intimate partners violence - the pandemic within the pandemic - is but one example.ⁱ Growing exploitation, exploding burdens of unpaid care,ⁱⁱ loss of essential health services, disrupted schooling, massive and seemingly irreversible losses of employment and job opportunities and 50 million women or more being pushed into extreme poverty are several others. To boot, while women have carried out much of the crucial and often dangerous work in responding to the crisis with women health care workers at the forefront of the strained health system response to COVID-19, they have largely been excluded from the decision-making.ⁱⁱⁱ All in all, the pandemic has had the effect of erasing decades of painstakingly slow progress towards gender equality.

The pandemic has amply demonstrated the interconnectivity and intersectionality of issues. Addressing women's health requires resolving issues relating also to security, care services, education, employment, poverty and the full spectrum of women's rights. Similarly, being attentive to women's specific circumstances and social and political identities is essential, including their race, color, ethnicity, migratory status, sexual orientation, to mention some examples. Urgent action is required in a wide variety of fields to guarantee their health, the enjoyment of their rights and achieve gender equality.

ⁱ Gender based violence (GBV) is an ignored pandemic that urgently needs a systemic and intersectional response involving action by governments, parliaments, international as well as non-governmental organizations and movements. Even before the pandemic, 1 in 3 women - around 736 million globally - will during her lifetime experience physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner. Since then, the pandemic has devastated efforts to prevent and respond to this form of violence and catalyzed an explosion in global GBV case numbers. See further: The Ignored Pandemic: The Dual Crises of Gender-Based Violence and COVID-19- Oxfam International Report-briefing paper 2021 as well as World Health Organisation. (2021). Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018: Executive summary. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240026681>

ⁱⁱ Women and girls are shouldering an increased burden of unpaid care, as school closures and household isolation shift care for children, older persons, and other family members from the paid economy to families and communities.

ⁱⁱⁱ Data from the UNDP-UN Women Global Gender Response Tracker indicates that globally, women make up only 24% of task force members and 18% of task force leaders. Women's representation is highest in Europe, Northern America, Australia and New Zealand (33%), followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (28%) and sub-Saharan Africa (20%). Only 8 countries have task forces with gender parity in membership and a woman lead or co-lead (Canada, Chile, Estonia, Ethiopia, Finland, Saint Lucia, Switzerland and the United States). Of 262 task forces with sex-disaggregated data, 7% have gender parity; 83% are dominated by men. 26 countries have task forces with no women at all among their members.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Address gender based violence as a matter of priority.
- Ensure all women and girls have access to health services and social protection commensurate with their needs at all times.
- Prioritize funding of health services for women and girls in all countries.
- Boost the care economy.
- Promote gender-responsive employment policies for an inclusive and job-rich recovery.
- Make sure that women are full participants in all decision-making processes and at all levels, including in local communities.
- Speed up progress towards gender equality.

PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

GOVERNMENTS SHOULD:

- Prioritize prevention and response services relating to gender-based violence. Declare them essential and eligible for rapid response funding. Establish, or strengthen existing, multi-year flexible funding arrangements for feminist movements and organisations working to end gender-based violence and support survivors. Facilitate women's and LGBTQIA+ organizations' involvement in decision-making processes and ensure an equal and meaningful representation of women in the planning and delivery of services. Work with women's organizations and women human rights defenders to develop measures to increase their safety;
- Introduce special measures to detect and care for cases of gender-based violence against women and strengthen channels for counselling and emergency care, offer reporting through telephone lines, digital media and sometimes in-person services, ensure continuity of social, psychological and legal services by declaring them essential, strengthen the capacity of specialized teams through working in shifts, training and expansion, and establish new shelters;^{1,2}
- Ensure that all officials who in one form or another come in contact with victims of violence are fully sensitized and trained to be able to identify them and ensure that they receive the assistance and care

to which they are entitled (specially important at a time when women are more isolated and less able to reach out for assistance);³

- Need for special focus on training law enforcement officials;⁴
- Ensure that health care and social protection services are gender responsive and adequate to meet the needs of all women and girls,⁵ (including women living in vulnerable contexts, for example women with disabilities and those in humanitarian disasters).⁶ Equally, guarantee availability of mental health care for all women in need thereof;⁷
- Recognise and normalise women's health services as essential health services and maintain them during any pandemic or similar crisis so that women can receive sexual and reproductive health services at all times and thus avoid neglect, unwanted pregnancies and increased risks to their health;⁸
- Invest substantially in the care economy (where women traditionally provide over three quarters of all unpaid care work), both to offset the increased workload that women have faced in this sector during the pandemic, but also to improve women's possibilities to work, study and run their businesses;⁹
- Encourage greater sharing of unpaid care and domestic work between women and men. Longer-term priorities include integrated care systems, accessible basic infrastructure and time-saving technology, transformed labor markets, and supportive macroeconomic policies around the care economy;¹⁰
- Recognise women's rights organizations as essential service providers and increase funding to support these organizations. Ensure their meaningful participation in COVID-19 decision-making, safeguard civil society spaces and protect women human rights defenders;¹¹
- Review school syllabuses so that they are gender sensitive and do not serve to reinforce gender inequalities and patriarchal societies. Develop school syllabuses with a gender equality perspective and integrate new teaching methods addressing girls' and young women's unique needs for safety, health and well-being;¹²
- Adapt the delivery of education, through digital and non-digital methods, to ensure continued skills acquisition and learning, with particular attention to the needs of young women and girls;¹³
- Work with funding agencies and international organizations to redress the persistent underfunding of initiatives for gender equality and prevent and respond to gender-based violence in humanitarian action globally;¹⁴
- Align national pandemic response plans with national gender-based violence actions plans and international instruments and commitments;
- Make sure that women effectively have access to and are vaccinated against COVID-19 at the same rate as men in all regions and countries of the world,¹⁵ and address gender-related barriers to vaccine access as a matter of priority;¹⁶
- Promote gender-responsive employment policies for an inclusive and job-rich recovery, for example, by investing in the care economy, reducing the current gender gap in social protection coverage, promoting equal pay for work of equal value, preventing, addressing and eliminating violence and harassment (both domestic and work-related gender-based violence and harassment), and promoting more women in decision-making positions;^{iv}
- Pay particular attention to the employment needs of those parts of the populations that have been the worst affected by the crisis such as women and, in particular, young women;¹⁷ Ensure that policies and programs are sensitive to those who otherwise belong to marginalised populations because of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, migration, HIV status or being displaced or living in a humanitarian emergency;
- Assess fiscal stabilization and stimulus packages from a gender equality perspective and monitor the design and impact of COVID-19 stimulus packages through gender responsive budgeting;^v

iv The policy measures implemented during the pandemic have been of unprecedented scale, particularly in developed countries. However, disappointingly few measures have been gender-responsive. By and large countries have essentially failed to address the emergency by supporting women's attachment to the labor market and improving their working conditions, including the quality of women's earnings and their security in the labor market. See also Building Forward Fairer: Women's rights to work and at work at the core of the COVID-19 recovery, ILO, Policy Brief, July 2021, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms_814499.pdf

v The analysis and data these tools generate can support governments and civil society in assessing the extent to which stimulus packages promote gender equality and allow them to monitor how these packages are operationalised and implemented as there can be many obstacles to financial support reaching especially low-income women; see How to Assess Fiscal Stimulus Packages from a Gender Equality Perspective, ILO and UNWOMEN Policy Tool, March 2021, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_766991.pdf

- Mainstream gender into national statistical strategies and prioritize it in regular data collection processes. Make greater investments in national statistical capacity to collect and analyze gender data. Collaborate with women's rights organizations to develop data collection instruments and analysis reflective of diverse gender realities;
 - Ensure that women participate fully and on an equal footing with men in all instances / offices / mechanisms that serve to address the consequences of the pandemic and help countries build forward better;¹⁸
 - Facilitate the engagement of women and women's organizations in decision-making for the COVID-19 response, and in developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating policies and programmes. Ensure that they are equipped with sufficient support to carry out their work, including through access to information and dedicated and flexible funding. Support women's leadership and participation by achieving a gender balance in institutions responsible for COVID-19 response and recovery, as well as in preparedness for future health crises;
 - Ensure that a future treaty or similar international instrument on pandemic preparedness is gender sensitive, responds to the particular needs of women and girls, and employs a gender sensitive language.
- strengthening laws relating to domestic abuse,^{vi} and systematically adopt gender-sensitive legislation;^{vii}
- Ratify (and convert into national legislation) the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) which entered into force on 25 June 2021 and which provides a framework for tackling violence and harassment in the world of work, including gender-based violence and harassment, that ranges from prevention to protection, enforcement and remedies, training and awareness-raising;²¹
 - Hold governments to account so that all national statistical data is disaggregated by gender and other relevant characteristics, including race, age, sexual orientation and disability, to allow for intersectional analysis and action;
 - Establish a comprehensive, time-bound, national plan of action to achieve gender equality (or adapt existing plan as the case may be), with input from government, civil society organizations & NGOs, private sector, academia and others.²²

THE PRIVATE SECTOR SHOULD:

PARLIAMENTS SHOULD:

- Hold the government to account for its actions (and inactions) in the course of the pandemic. Commission in-depth studies examining the pandemic from a gender-perspective and how the government and different service sectors have responded to the crisis to be able to make an evaluation highlighting achievements as well as areas where improvements are required both in the short, medium and long term;¹⁹
 - Hold debates in parliament and question ministers regarding gender aspects of the pandemic, including how the country can best go forward. Place special focus on specific issues such as combating domestic and gender-based violence, reversing the recent setbacks and achieving urgent progress towards gender equality;²⁰
 - Examine pertinent laws from a gender perspective in the light of how women have been affected by the pandemic and, for example, consider amending and
- Identify, eliminate and prevent future work-related gender-based violence and harassment and cooperate with government in the implementation of the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention;
 - Help ensure a gender-responsive recovery to the pandemic that facilitates employment of women who have suffered disproportionate job and income losses during the pandemic, including because of their over representation in the hardest-hit sectors. Pay particular attention to the needs of young women who have been the worst affected by the pandemic;²³ Work with local, national and international gender organizations and benefit from their advice to help design gender transformative actions;²⁴
 - Systematically include women in decision-making processes that relate to regulating conditions of work and business development.

vi See in this context the recent experience in the UK where the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 includes adaptations specifically designed to tackle domestic abuse. <https://www.shoosmiths.co.uk/insights/articles/the-domestic-abuse-act-2021-how-the-law-is-adapting-to-tackle-domestic-abuse>

vii See also: OECD/ODIHR. Making laws work for women and men: A practical guide to gender-sensitive legislation. 2017, https://www.legislationline.org/download/id/9545/file/Guidelines_Practical_guide_gender_sensitive_legislation_eng.pdf

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD :

- Fully exploit their close contacts with people and communities and take on (and receive the necessary financial resources to do so) a more extensive role in mitigating the consequences of the pandemic for women by helping to identify and provide support to victims of domestic violence, providing care support, directing economic and social support to those most in need like poor women, and providing space for women to take part in decision-making processes relating to addressing consequences of the pandemic and how to build forward better;
- Provide increased support in relation to the care economy, including by promoting behavioral change through evidence-based advocacy campaigns that challenge masculinities.²⁵

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD :

- Evaluate and draw necessary lessons from how the pandemic has affected international cooperation and the modus operandi of the United Nations System of international organizations, agencies and programs. Adapt programs, procedures and working mechanisms as necessary to ensure a fully functioning system relating to women and gender equality issues where all member States can participate on an equal footing and where the secretariat can provide necessary services;^{viii}
- Publish guidelines (or lessons-learned) spelling out how each international organization and its partners promote gender equality and ensure a gender sensitive approach in their work in light of the experience gained during the pandemic;²⁶
- Issue gender specific briefs / reports on a regular basis outlining how the pandemic within their specific area of competence is affecting women and what steps they recommend be taken to address specific issues of concern.

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating effect on women and on gender equality. It has a woman's face. It has put in stark relief how unprepared countries have been, everywhere, to deal with a major health crisis without adversely affecting women and girls. If ever there was a need, COVID-19 has clearly demonstrated that emergencies are not gender neutral.

Today, countries have a clear choice. They can forgo attitudes and policies of the past and decide to institute real transformative change that ensures respect for women's rights and achieves gender equality. That is a political choice. Converting it into reality requires systematically applying a gender transformative approach when developing policies and programmes to recover from the pandemic and invest in creating more resilient societies and economies (building forward better). It also requires putting in place policies and programmes that guarantee respect for women's rights and gender-equality when future health emergencies arise. At its core, however, it remains a political choice that all countries can and should make.

^{viii} For an initial assessment of how pandemic has affected international cooperation and organizations see COVID-19 and the Governance of International Organizations, Gian Luca Burci, 9 December 2020, BRILL publications, https://brill.com/view/journals/iolr/17/3/article-p485_485.xml?language=en

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