

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND GENDER ASPECTS



The year 2020 marks two important landmarks in gender equality achievement: the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, and the 20th year of implementing Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic caused cancellation and postponement of many important international meetings, including a shortened version of the 64th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, but it is also risking to heavily jeopardize the progress made over recent years.

Vulnerable populations are hardest hit victims of any pandemic, not only in terms of mortality, but also in terms of deepening the social, political and economic divide and exponentially increasing their negative consequences.

Among vulnerable populations, those affected by gender-based discriminations might be the ones paying a highest price for the consequences of the pandemic, due to their subordinate position in society. The social lockdown may increase isolation and aggressive behaviours by violent partners and the economic downturn might make it difficult to maintain opportunities for decent work. With the closure of schools, efforts to ensure access to education for girls might be put aside, and in some cases abandoned entirely, while programmes for prenatal, maternal and child health also may be overshadowed by the pandemic's emergency priorities. While women have continued to bear the heaviest burden from childcare and attending to family needs, they remain as unknown heroes at the forefront of hospital care as nurses and doctors.



In a recent policy brief, the Secretary General identifies three priority areas where governments should concentrate their efforts to ensure policies and measures are built with a gender dimension, to address the current response and long-term recovery efforts. These are:

1. Ensuring women's representation in all Covid-19 related decisions
2. Setting up fair mechanisms for the recognition of informal and formal work; and
3. Considering women and girls addressing the future impact of Covid-19.

In Italy, the Covid-19 pandemic hit particularly hard, with the national health system reduced to near collapse. The virus mortality rates seemed to be affecting women slightly less than men; preliminary analysis shows mortality rates at 47 per cent among females and 52 per cent among males.

However, in traditionally female dominated employment areas, such as nurses and health care workers, house workers and supermarket

cashiers, percentages of infection in women were noted to be nearly twice that of men, with infections up to 66 per cent versus 34 per cent among nurses.

Fearing a possible surge in domestic violence due to the quarantine lockdown, various Member States have taken measures to ensure women are not left alone and at the mercy of violent partners. Spain has set up an emergency plan which includes helplines and special housing for victims. France, which already has the highest rates of gender-based violence in Europe, had to respond to a soaring 30 per cent increase in domestic violence cases during the Covid-19 quarantine, converting hotels to shelters for victims. In Argentina, the Ministry for Women, Gender and Diversity has designated pharmacies as referral places for women victims of intimate partner violence.

Like most countries in Europe, Italy already had a strategic plan against domestic violence in place for the years 2017-2020, which included policies and financial resources for protecting women victims of intimate partner violence (IPV). However, in addition to that, the Minister for Equal Opportunities declared a number of emergency measures, including a special increase in the budget to support anti-violence centres and special shelters for victims of gender-based violence; this allowed for more immediate support to women victims of IPV during the Covid-19 emergency. An additional 24-hour help line is available for psychological support or for referral and legal assistance. Media campaigns on national television also have been launched and financial resources have been set aside to support sex workers and victims of trafficking in persons.

With regard to women in the workplace, various Member States, including Italy, have set up emergency funds to protect workers from job losses and to provide subsidies during the quarantine.

However, these measures are likely to exclude the informal economy sector, where women represent a significant number. The social and economic crisis which is most likely to follow the Covid-19 pandemic may be further exacerbated for women if gender differences in wages, and career opportunities, continue to be undervalued in national development policies.

Finally, in various countries, political and economic decision-making committees as well as scientific boards, set up during the pandemic to assist governmental decisions, have been predominantly composed of men. Continuing to exclude women's voices from the current and post-Covid-19 political debate might have a detrimental effect not only in the short term, with decisions that might not reflect the actual priority needs of women and girls, but also will likely have a negative impact in achieving the Agenda 2030 goals.

UNICRI conducted in 2014 a study to shed light on the impact of the economic crisis of 2008 on women's wellbeing and gender equality, in four countries of the Mediterranean Basin. The study analysed women's public and private aspects of life, such as IPV, number of divorces, employment rates, poverty, minority groups, housing, health, prostitution and retirement benefits. In all countries analysed, violence against women and girls in particular increased, exacerbating already-existing situations of socio-economic stress. Where the "gender gap" was greatest - in the status of women's health, participation in the economy, education levels, and representation in politics - women were more likely to be subjected to violence. In the effort to create a prevention strategy, economic and social empowerment are paramount. This study also analysed the coping responses from governments and made highly useful recommendations. This research complements several initiatives undertaken by UNICRI toward the prevention of violence against women, encompassing research, awareness raising, capacity building of law enforcement, and the protection of victims through women's empowerment programmes and cooperation with civil society.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Governments should ensure that women's' and girls' needs are taken into due consideration in contingency crisis and emergency plans, in order to benefit both men and women equally and leave no one behind during emergency preparedness and response plans.

Governments also should ensure that women's voices are heard in times of crisis. This means making sure that there is equal representation of men and women in decision making boards and in political decisions and policy spaces at large, at all stages, during and following a crisis or emergency.

Access to prenatal and maternal care services and frontline responses to gender-based violence should not be diminished in times of crisis, and indeed should be considered essential at all times.

Governments should increase collection of sex-disaggregated and gender data in order to ensure that the gender perspective is regularly included and integrated in all national emergency response plans.

Governments should ensure access to social protection mechanisms for all workers including informal workers. Women's unpaid work at home and for childcare

should be accounted for in social protection policies.

Economic crises can significantly and negatively impact gender-based inequalities, worldwide, and governments can use such crises as opportunities to take leadership in reducing such inequalities, in the short, medium and long term, for the benefit of women and men.

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The Author

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