

The IACHR calls on Member States to adopt a gender perspective in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to combat sexual and domestic violence in this context

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Washington, D.C. - The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), in the framework of its Coordination Unit for the Rapid and Integrated Response to the COVID-19 pandemic (SACROI COVID-19, for its Spanish acronym), calls on Member States to incorporate a gender perspective in the responses to this crisis and to combat sexual and domestic violence, as well as the discrimination that affects women in this context. Specifically, the Commission stresses the necessity to adapt to the needs of women and girls the political and legislative measures that have been issued to tackle the pandemic, considering the multiple structural factors that perpetuate discrimination against women and girls and increase their risk in this context.

The IACHR is deeply alarmed by the reports that show an increase of domestic violence following the establishment of the measures of social confinement and social isolation adopted by the authorities to contain the spread of COVID-19 in the countries of the region. In this regard, the Commission has become aware, through its permanent monitoring, of the significant increase in these figures in countries such as Brazil and the United States, which are seen in other countries of the region as well. In Brazil, the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights registered an increase of 17% in reports of gender violence following measures to contain the epidemic. Likewise, in the United States, country security departments reported an increase in the number of reports of domestic violence. In this sense, the Portland's Police in Oregon reported an increment of 27% of calls compared to previous months.

In this regard, the IACHR calls on the States of the region to strengthen services to respond to gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence in the context of confinement and social distancing. This could be done by developing alternative reporting mechanisms, expanding the supply of shelters for victims of domestic violence, and strengthening the capacity of security and justice actors to provide timely responses in the context of the pandemic.

The Commission also notes with extreme concern that, in the context of domestic confinement and the decrease of the amount of people circulating on the streets, acts of sexual violence and rape against women, girls and adolescents have increased. In Peru, for example, the authorities have reported that, during the first 17 days of confinement, 34 women, including 27 girls, were victims of sexual assault. According to available information, these numbers represent an increase in this type of violence in the country.

The IACHR calls on the States to fulfil their duty of due diligence by promptly and thoroughly investigating the facts, bringing the authors to trial and convicting those responsible, and providing reparation to the victims and their families. These procedures must adopt a gender perspective and comprehensive protection for the victims. In the context of the pandemic, in addition to comprehensive sex education initiatives, States should promote mass media and social media campaigns focused on disseminating information on available reporting mechanisms and assistance to the victims. Moreover, States must keep their sexual and reproductive health services, including the distribution of contraceptive methods, prenatal and postnatal care, services to prevent sexually transmitted infections, as well as, where is permitted by their internal laws, the termination of pregnancy.

In the framework of the pandemic, the Commission highlights that the loss of income and reduction of economic activity is an additional factor to the rise in the inequality and poverty levels, especially affecting women, particularly women heads of households. The Commission highlights the need for a specific approach towards the 126 million female workers in the informal economy, as well as domestic workers, rural women and sex workers, and other groups disproportionately affected by the pandemic, such as migrant women, homeless women and trans women. Such policies must have a human rights perspective and focus on the specific needs of these women. In this regard, States must adopt measures aimed at overcoming the disproportionate impact of the economic crisis on women, promoting their socio-economic reintegration through measures of relief or economic support, through the expansion of their social protection networks and focused on the promotion of sustainable development.

On the other hand, the IACHR calls on States to provide due protection to female health and social work professionals, serving in the frontline of response to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), women represent 70% of people employed in the health sector worldwide.

Also, it also states that women disproportionately occupy frontline roles in the world's struggle to treat infected people, as well as to carry out care tasks under the social distancing measures. In that respect, apart from the risks of infection and the mental burden of their professional work, women also face unpaid family care work, including caring for girls, boys and the elderly.

Finally, the IACHR recognizes the current challenges faced by the States in containing the pandemic, as well as the importance of the guidelines for confinement and social distancing. At the same time, it calls on States to strengthen the incorporation of a gender perspective in all measures adopted in response to the pandemic. The Commission reiterates that the adoption of measures must have as an essential condition the participation of women in decision-making positions in the committees and working groups in response to the crisis caused by COVID-19, in order to ensure the incorporation of the gender perspective in the design, implementation, execution and monitoring of the measures and policies adopted in response to the pandemic. The foregoing, starting from an intersectional approach taking into account the contexts and conditions that enhance the effects of the crisis, such as economic precariousness, migrant status, deprivation of liberty, ethnic-racial origin, sexual orientation and identity and / or gender expression, among others.

In this regard, and considering the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, regarding the protection of the rights of women, girls, and adolescents, the Commission recommends that States:

1. Incorporate the gender perspective from an intersectional approach in all State responses to contain the pandemic, taking into account the different contexts and conditions that enhance the vulnerability to which women are exposed, such as economic precariousness, age, migrant status, disability status, deprivation of liberty, ethnic-racial origin, sexual orientation, gender identity and / or expression, among others.
2. Reformulate the traditional mechanisms of response to gender-based violence, adopting alternative communication channels as well as emergency care lines, strengthening community networks in order to expand the reporting channels and protection orders during the period of confinement and mobility restrictions. Likewise, ensure the availability

of shelters and shelters for women victims of domestic violence, where there must exist conditions to prevent contagion.

3. Develop care protocols and strengthen the capacity of security agents and justice actors involved in the investigation and sanction of acts of domestic violence, as well as carrying out the distribution of guidance materials to all state institutions.

4. Guarantee the availability and continuity of sexual and reproductive health services during the pandemic crisis, increasing, in particular, measures for comprehensive sex education and the dissemination of information in accessible media and with adequate language, in order to reach women in their diversity.

5. Strengthen food security policies and social protection networks with a gender perspective, including minimum wage policies and the provision of health care focused on the specific need of these women in combating the crisis generated by COVID-19.

A principal, autonomous body of the Organization of American States (OAS), the IACHR derives its mandate from the OAS Charter and the American Convention on Human Rights. The Inter-American Commission has a mandate to promote respect for and to defend human rights in the region and acts as a consultative body to the OAS in this area. The Commission is composed of seven independent members who are elected in an individual capacity by the OAS General Assembly and who do not represent their countries of origin or residence.

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