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Gender and COVID-19: A guidance note for parliaments

In times of pandemic, women and men are affected differently. Failing to take on board gendered dimensions of the emergency response will exacerbate existing and persisting inequalities and create new ones. This could amplify the crisis and increase its current and future impact and its costs for women and for society as a whole. The Ebola outbreak from 2013 to 2016 and the Zika outbreak in 2015 and 2016 had countless impacts on women's lives as they became infected through their carer roles, died as a result of the redeployment of resources away from women's reproductive health and had little say in the policy responses.

Twenty-five years after the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, gender equality and women's rights cannot afford setbacks and should not become victims of COVID-19. On the contrary, the response to COVID-19 cannot be deemed efficient and sustainable if it is not built on gender-responsive decisions and actions.

COVID-19 and women

Women are the mainstay of the essential services needed to withstand and cope with the pandemic. Some 70 per cent of the health workforce caring for those affected is made up of women. Women are also caring for those affected as heads of household and working in grocery stores and pharmacies. This means that women are on the front line and at high risk of infection.

The crisis and some of the measures to contain or respond to it can also put women's lives, health and safety doubly in jeopardy. Violence against women has already reached epidemic proportions in all societies, with 137 women killed every day globally by a member of their own family. The level of domestic violence and sexual exploitation further increases as a result of confined living conditions, economic stress and fear about the virus. We have also learnt from previous epidemics that resources should not be diverted from essential sexual and reproductive health services, otherwise the rights and lives of women and girls are disproportionately impacted in such crisis situations. During the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, more women died of obstetric complications than of the disease itself.

The impact of COVID-19 will be felt disproportionately by women who make up the majority of refugees and internally displaced populations, including in conflict-affected regions. Overcrowded living conditions and settings with poor water and sanitation amplify the risk of transmission and hinder preventive measures, such as hand-washing and social distancing. Access to health care is often difficult, furthermore, and there is a greater risk of domestic violence and exploitation in these conditions.

The world is experiencing not only a public health crisis but also an economic crisis. This economic downturn will disproportionately affect women and increase vulnerabilities. Women workers are more likely than men to have the lowest paid and least protected jobs, often in the informal sector (particularly in agriculture, cleaning and catering sectors and domestic work). They are disproportionately excluded from contributory and tax-financed health coverage and from social benefit protections, such as pensions, social insurance, paid sick leave, or parental and care leave. They

are most likely to be the first ones to lose income that is crucial for them, their families and their communities and societies at large.

As social distancing and movement restrictions lead to increased use of digital technologies, greater vigilance is required around the fact that women and girls have less access to internet and digital literacy and are more targeted by gender-based online violence. Women leaders – such as women in politics, women human rights defenders, bloggers, journalists, activists, etc. – are at particular risk online. Studies conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) on violence against women in parliaments have shown that social media are the main channel for threats. With home confinement, school closures and remote work, the household is becoming the central place where domestic, professional and parental responsibilities converge. Will this be an opportunity to better distribute domestic chores and childcare among women and men so that both can continue their professional lives? Or on the contrary will women continue to take on the majority of unpaid domestic and parental tasks to the detriment of their paid work life?

By addressing gender equality in today's response, we limit the impact of the pandemic and pave the way for a smoother recovery and a better future.

Placing gender equality at the core of the parliamentary response to COVID-19

As parliaments reorganize their means of functioning and adapt their work to the new realities imposed by COVID-19, it is crucial that their decisions and actions be gender-responsive.

Below are some key issues and questions that – if considered and addressed – could transform gender-neutral or gender-blind parliamentary adaptation strategies into gender-responsive ones.

Gender mainstreaming and women's participation and leadership in parliamentary decision-making on COVID-19

For policymaking to be as inclusive and efficient as possible, mapping and securing the participation of both men and women is a must. At a time when parliaments and their structures are meeting in a reduced capacity, often with a reduced number of members, it is vital to secure the participation of women at all levels and their leadership in the decision-making and oversight committees, units and/or task forces put in place in parliament to respond to the crisis. Equal participation of men and women, women's leadership and a clear gender-mainstreaming mandate are key to ensure the inclusivity and efficiency of such parliamentary mechanisms.

Just as important is the inclusion of women's voices and the contribution of women's organizations, women representatives of labour market sectors, women working in the informal sector, women caring for the ill, and so on, in all parliamentary deliberations during the COVID-19 crisis: to this end, virtual witness testimony via videoconferencing technologies, among other methods, would be a useful contribution.

Continued functioning of existing gender equality committees and the inclusion of gender equality in the mandate of new special parliamentary committees set up to scrutinize the government's COVID-19 response are also essential to guarantee an accountable institutional commitment to gender mainstreaming and, ultimately, an efficient parliamentary response to the pandemic.

Key questions to consider:

Are both women and men participating in parliamentary decision-making on COVID-19?

- Are there women participating at all levels in the crisis and decision-making committees, units and/or task forces put in place in parliament?
- If parliament has reduced the number of MPs allowed to sit, are women MPs included among those allowed to sit? Is there a balance between men and women? If not, what is the proportion of women and how can it be enhanced towards equality?
- In exercising its oversight functions, is parliament ensuring that there is a balance between men and women or proportions as close as possible to 50/50 in the task forces and other mechanisms created on COVID-19 at the State/Executive level?
- Are the voices and concerns of women in society included in the deliberations and decisions of parliamentary committees, units and/or task forces on designing and implementing the pandemic response? For example, are women's organizations, women representatives of labour market sectors, women working in the informal sector, women caring for the ill, etc., being heard and consulted by parliamentary committees and/or task forces, including by using virtual witness testimony via videoconferencing technologies?

Do parliamentary committees have a gender equality mandate?

- If some parliamentary committees are still meeting, including remotely, are gender equality committees meeting and contributing to all mitigation strategies from a gender perspective?
- If new special parliamentary committees are created to scrutinize the government's COVID-19 response, is scrutiny from a gender perspective included in their functions? Do they have the necessary capacities and resources to implement gender responsiveness?

Examples of parliamentary initiatives

The Chamber of Deputies of Argentina is allowing parliamentarians from vulnerable groups to participate in committee meetings via Zoom:
https://www.diputados.gov.ar/prensa/noticias/noticias-podio/noticias_1241.html

On 5 April, the National Assembly of Djibouti set up an ad hoc support and follow-up committee to help combat the COVID-19 pandemic. The newly established committee comprises 20 per cent women parliamentarians, slightly below the proportion of women in the National Assembly, which stands at 26.5 per cent:
www.ipu.org/parliaments-in-time-pandemic

COVID-19 and gender-responsive legislation

Laws adopted by parliament to allow the government to take measures to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 should be gender-responsive. Emergency assistance measures for the health and economy sectors, hospitals, doctors, workers, small businesses, the self-employed, families, and the socially disadvantaged must be informed by sex-disaggregated data, building on a gender-based analysis of the situation. A detailed understanding of rates of infection and mortality among men and among women, for example, or information on who are the main beneficiaries of economic measures taken to respond to the crisis will help better shape policies and laws such that they efficiently address the needs of both men and women.

Key questions to consider:

- If laws are adopted by parliament to allow the government to take measures to mitigate COVID-19 for people and the economy, do those laws include a call and provisions to ensure that mitigation measures are gender-responsive?
- If emergency assistance measures for the health and economy sectors, hospitals, doctors, workers, small businesses, the self-employed, families, and the socially disadvantaged are taken, are they being designed based on sex-disaggregated data and are they responsive to the specific needs of women?
- When adopting legislation or amending standing orders to allow essential parliamentary work to be pursued, do adaptation measures take into account the specific situation and needs of women members of parliament and staff?

Overseeing the government's COVID-19 response from a gender perspective

As mentioned above, structures set up to oversee government action during the crisis need to be gender-sensitive in their composition, mandate and working methods. Gender-responsive oversight will achieve a more effective review of the impact of actions taken, as analysing policy, measures, programmes and spending through a gender lens will help address the needs of women and men without discrimination.

Key questions to consider:

- Are women who are caring for the ill and providing other essential services being recognized for their role and fairly compensated, supported and equipped with protective equipment?
- Are resources being diverted from life-saving health-care services for women, including safe maternal and newborn care, and access to contraception and other reproductive health services?
- What is being done for the most vulnerable women to ensure they can access food, water, information and health services?
- Is specific financial support being provided to sectors that may not benefit from social protection and unemployment benefits, such as the informal sector?
- With the increased risk of domestic violence, what is being done to ensure that women have access to protection, resources and shelters as essential services? What is being done to curb the impact of the outbreak on support services for survivors, particularly health-care, police and justice services? How can women facing domestic violence call for help or escape when full time at home with violent partners? Have concrete actions to protect women survivors of violence and respond to their needs been adapted and included in the emergency measures against the pandemic?
- Are there strong policies and codes of conduct in place to address the endemic violence against female health workers and sexual harassment in the health and social sectors?
- With schools closed, what measures have been taken to protect girls at risk of sexual violence?

For tips on overseeing government action from a gender perspective, please see: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2017-10/global-parliamentary-report-2017-parliamentary-oversight-parliaments-power-hold-government-account> (particularly “Tips for MPs: Mainstreaming gender equality in oversight activities”, page 19)

Communicating and raising awareness on COVID 19 and its effects – the role of MPs and parliaments

Media and other communication platforms are being used to reach out to constituents to inform them of measures taken to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. Such initiatives also facilitate exchanges with constituents on their experiences and needs and can serve to identify the specific needs of women and girls.

Awareness-raising that focuses on social distancing and hygiene measures should draw attention to the importance of sharing care responsibilities equally between women and men. Male MPs in particular can highlight how important it is that men and women share household and care responsibilities equally.

Speaking out in the media and on other platforms on the crucial role that women are playing in responding to the health emergency, maintaining basic services and supporting families raises awareness of and strengthens solidarity with and support to women in their essential roles.

Key questions to consider:

- How can MPs reach out to constituents while promoting gender equality and gender responsiveness?
- Are media and other communication platforms being used to reach out to constituents to inform them of measures taken to respond to the COVID-19 crisis? Are such initiatives ensuring exchanges with constituents on their experiences and needs, including the specific needs of women and girls?
- Is virtual outreach to community organizations, such as health centres, food banks and women's shelters, being used to identify the support required?
- If public awareness-raising on social distancing and hygiene measures is being conducted by parliamentary leadership and MPs, are they also raising awareness of the importance of sharing care responsibilities equally between women and men? Are male MPs highlighting how important it is that men and women share household and care responsibilities equally?
- Are parliament and MPs highlighting in the media and other platforms the crucial role that women are playing in responding to the health emergency, maintaining basic services and supporting families, so as to build awareness of the need to demonstrate solidarity towards them and support them in their essential roles?

Examples of parliamentary initiatives

The Chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, Evelyn Regner, issued a press release urging the European Union and its Member States to increase support to victims of domestic violence during the COVID-19 crisis: www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200406IPR76610/covid-19-stopping-the-rise-in-domestic-violence-during-lockdown

The IPU President, Mexican MP Gabriela Cuevas Barron, drew attention to the high proportion of women in the health sector and to the specific situation of women in unpaid or underpaid jobs, calling for investment in gender parity in the COVID-19 response: <https://twitter.com/ipupresident>

The Parliament of Timor-Leste, with the UN Development Programme, has produced a public health video about COVID-19 and how to stay safe. The speakers are both

men and women and most of them are parliamentarians:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9Hk4RXhCrl>

Gender-sensitive parliaments in times of COVID-19

In times of crisis, parliaments are crafting new ways of working, adapting to the new reality. In this context, measures taken can gain efficiency by integrating a gender perspective from the very beginning. Parliaments in times of crisis cannot ignore gender equality. On the contrary, the crisis can and should be an opportunity to fast-track decisions, processes and working methods that are conducive for parliament to remain, be or become a gender-sensitive institution.

Key questions to consider:

- In these extraordinary times, are MPs and staff supported in juggling their work and household or family duties, without undue burden related to gendered roles, including by allowing teleworking with flexible hours for both men and women and granting paid leave to both men and women staff who no longer have access to childcare?
- Are adequate resources, knowledge-sharing and equipment allocated to facilitate teleworking for all MPs and staff so that men and women alike can pursue their work in the best way possible?
- Are all meetings, including virtual meetings, taking place during office hours?
- Is pay for all staff guaranteed, including non-salaried staff who have been asked to stay home or staff considered vulnerable to COVID-19 who should stay home because of age or medical conditions?
- Is support and guidance offered to MPs and staff on how to make safe use of digital technology in their work, including in cases of online violence, to which women are more exposed?

Examples of parliamentary initiatives

In Italy, many parliamentary staff members are working remotely, and staff with children under the age of 16 have been allowed to take parental leave while schools are closed: www.ipu.org/parliaments-in-time-pandemic

The National Assembly of Ecuador adopted a regulation for the implementation of virtual sessions and teleworking and trained permanent secretaries of parliamentary committees on using videoconferencing systems; moderating virtual sessions, including voting on proposals; and transmitting, processing and storing digital information:
www.asambleanacional.gob.ec/sites/default/files/private/asambleanacional/filesasambleanacionalnameuid-20/transparencia-2015/literal-a/a3/2020-03-19-reglamento-sesiones-virtuales-teletrabajo.pdf

Parliamentary action today for a better tomorrow

The current COVID-19 crisis brings great challenges, but it may also open windows of opportunity to address and redress existing imbalances and inequalities and build fairer and more resilient societies in the long run.

- By strengthening gender-mainstreaming capacity in parliament now, good practice will not only have a positive impact on decisions taken and measures designed today but will also become the way in which parliamentary business is conducted in the future.

- Setting up a monitoring system to document the measures taken within parliament will feed into post-COVID deliberations and decisions on how parliaments can continue to function in a gender-sensitive and gender-responsive way at all times.
- If parliaments contribute now to ensuring health coverage for all, in line with the IPU resolution on universal health coverage, this will have long-lasting benefits for all, today and in the future.
- If parliaments take the opportunity now to challenge existing stereotypes and the traditional division of work within households and in the economy, this will support the economic empowerment of women and girls for years and generations to come.
- Documenting now the essential role of women in the crisis response, in society and in the economy, will help ensure that these roles are more systematically acknowledged and taken into account in the future. This will feed into the necessary cultural shift towards gender equality.

Useful IPU resources

- *Plan of action for gender-sensitive parliaments*
<https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reference/2016-07/plan-action-gender-sensitive-parliaments>
- Toolkit for parliaments on gender-sensitive parliaments
<https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/toolkits/2016-11/evaluating-gender-sensitivity-parliaments-self-assessment-toolkit>
- “COVID-19: What does it mean for gender?”
<https://www.ipu.org/news/voices/2020-03/covid-19-what-does-it-mean-gender>
- *Guidelines for the elimination of sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliament*
<https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reference/2019-11/guidelines-elimination-sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-in-parliament>
- *Global Parliamentary Report 2017 – Parliamentary oversight: Parliament's power to hold government to account*
<https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2017-10/global-parliamentary-report-2017-parliamentary-oversight-parliaments-power-hold-government-account> – see in particular “Tips for MPs: Mainstreaming gender equality in oversight activities” (page 19)

Share your experience with us and the parliamentary community:

We aim to develop this document further with examples of gender-responsive parliamentary practices in times of COVID-19. Let us know what gender equality measures and initiatives parliament and parliamentarians are taking in their response to COVID-19 by writing to Zeina Hilal, Manager of the IPU Gender Partnership Programme, at zh@ipu.org.