

Government responses to COVID-19:

Lessons on gender equality for a world in turmoil

The overlapping impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, accelerating climate disasters and geopolitical conflict are a threat to gender equality and women's rights across the globe.

- A new report by UN Women and UNDP shows what governments can do now to prevent further rollbacks and recover lost ground, while enhancing resilience and preparedness for future shocks.
- Drawing on a unique global dataset of close to 5,000 measures adopted by 226 countries and territories in response to COVID-19, the report finds that overall government responses paid insufficient attention to gender dynamics.
- At the same time, there were significant cross-country variations and instances of innovation and learning that hold important lessons for gender-responsive policymaking in times of crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic caught the world off-guard. Governments have struggled, and often failed, to mitigate its negative effects on women and girls with reverberations that will be felt for years to come.

- Between March 2020 and August 2021, governments introduced a total 1,605 gender-sensitive measures. Most were adopted during the first three months of the pandemic, but their implementation was fraught with gaps and tensions.
- As violence against women and girls intensified in the context of quarantines and lockdowns, 163 countries took at least one measure to adapt service provision to respond; but only 55 mainstreamed violence against women and girls (VAWG) into their broader COVID-19 response plans.
- Measures directly aimed at strengthening women's economic security or supporting unpaid care made up a fraction of the global social protection and jobs response (20 per cent of over 3,000 measures adopted across 226 countries and territories). Consequently, gender equality in the labour market has suffered significant setbacks.
- While countries created special taskforces to tackle the rapidly evolving crisis, these relied heavily on pre-existing male-dominated networks, and as a result largely excluded women, who accounted for only 24 per cent of COVID-19 task force members across 130 countries and territories.

For the first time, the report provides analysis on the factors that led to a stronger gender response, generating key lessons for governments:

1) In a context of growing threats to democratic and open societies, strong institutions proved critical for an inclusive gender response.

- Countries with powerful feminist movements, stronger democracies and higher women's representation in parliaments adopted a higher number of gender-sensitive measures than those with limited feminist movements, weaker democracies and lower women's representation. This finding holds independent of national income.
- Democratic processes have given gender equality advocates and other progressive actors entry points to shape government responses to the pandemic. For example, the sub-national government of **Kerala**

in India leveraged high levels of public investment and citizen engagement to pioneer its gender-sensitive response to COVID-19.

2) Feminist movements and women's rights organizations provided an early warning system on the gender impacts of the pandemic, particularly on violence against women and girls (VAWG).

- In the first year of the pandemic, and despite government restrictions, women staged at least 2,711 protests against gender-based violence across 100 countries, accounting for 38 per cent of all women's protests during that period (more than 7,000 demonstrations across 139 countries and territories).
- Countries with the strongest feminist movements before the pandemic adopted on average 3 more measures to address VAWG during the crisis than those with weak movements. This finding holds independent of national income.
- In **Fiji**, the activism and decades-long work by women's CSOs to provide services for VAWG survivors, lobby for better legislative frameworks and increase VAWG sensitivity among the police and other actors laid the groundwork for one of the most comprehensive VAWG responses to the pandemic.

3) Women's representation and leadership in executive positions, parliaments and public administration was critical for translating feminist advocacy into policy action.

- Very few countries took any action on unpaid care at all, but countries with a high share of women in parliament took on average one more care measure than countries with a low share, independent of GDP.
- In **Mexico**, where gender parity in both chambers was achieved in 2018, an initiative promoted by feminist legislators to guarantee the right to care in the Constitution and create a national care system was passed by the Chamber of Deputies in 2020 (still to be ratified by the Senate).

4) Gender-sensitive responses also depended on policy legacies. Countries with robust public services and gender-responsive social protection systems were in a better position to respond, while others had to improvise, under pressure, and with varying degrees of success.

- When it came to protecting women's economic security and supporting unpaid care, countries in the global North with mature social protection systems, care policies and infrastructure were able to harness and adapt these to the pandemic context.
- Low-income countries in Africa and Asia struggled to respond and introduced a significantly lower number of measures compared to high- and middle-income countries; lack of fiscal space and prior policy infrastructure were major limitations.
- For example, only one-tenth of measures addressing unpaid care were taken in low- and lower-middle income countries (24 out of 226 measures).
- While most gender-sensitive cash transfers were rolled out in low- and middle-income countries, benefit levels in high income countries (US\$525 per person and month) were on average more than 12 times higher than those in low-income countries (US\$42).
- Despite facing major constraints, at least 15 countries—including **Brazil, Bangladesh and Liberia**—extended social protection to informal workers, with special provisions for women in the informal economy.

5) Digital tools sustained feminist activism online and enabled policy innovations and rapid support roll-out, reaching groups of women often left behind in 'normal times'.

- More than 100 countries—including **Japan, Sri Lanka** and **Uganda**—used digital tools to adapt hotlines and psychosocial support to survivors of violence.
- The use of digital tools and technologies in registration, enrolment and payment processes allowed countries to expand coverage and speed up delivery of gender-sensitive social protection measures.
- For example, a fragile low-income country like **Togo** launched a fully digital cash transfer programme for informal workers, with women receiving higher benefits than men.
- At the same time, persistent gender gaps in access to digital and financial infrastructure continued to exclude women, particularly those from marginalized groups.

6) Real-time gender data on the impact of the pandemic on women and girls was critical to making the case for gender-sensitive response measures, as was tracking what worked in government responses.

- Limits on in-person data collection, triggered a rise in remote data collection and use of non-traditional data sources. UN Women partnered with mobile phone operators, for example, to conduct rapid gender assessments in over 50 countries.
- These and other data innovations have been essential to provide timely evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls and have directly informed gender-sensitive government responses across a range of countries.
- In **Indonesia, Georgia** and **Ukraine**, for example, these data were used to advocate for additional resources to mainstream gender into recovery programmes and policies

With the world in turmoil, the lessons from the analysis of this unique dataset should be used to guide future crises response and to build resilience, through the following priority actions:

- Invest in gender-responsive social protection and public services *now* to increase resilience to future shocks [FINANCING].
- Build institutional capacity, strengthen networks and support women’s leadership for effective gender mainstreaming [INSTITUTIONS]
- Support feminist movements and women’s rights organizations in their agenda-setting, accountability and service-delivery roles [POLITICS]
- Strengthen data and evidence on gender equality and women’s rights during crises and beyond [DATA]
- Harness digital technologies for gender equality during crisis response, recovery and transformation [TECHNOLOGY]