Women’s Political Participation & Leadership in COVID-19 Response

Key messages

GENERAL

• **Women must be at the center of their COVID-19 recovery efforts: that starts with women’s equal representation and participation in decision-making.** Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex. Women must be involved in COVID-19 specialized groups or task forces, as well as legislative, policy, and budgetary decision-making processes—even if this requires special measures, such as quotas, to guarantee their participation. Women’s organizations who are often on the front line of response in communities should also be represented and supported.

• **Women are woefully underrepresented among political, health and economic decision-makers worldwide.** Nearly 70% of frontline health and social workers are women, which puts them at greater risk and women shoulder the lion’s share of unpaid healthcare work, equating to 2.35% of global GDP. Yet, they are only 24.9% of national legislators—far short of gender balance. Change is not deep or good enough; as the pandemic spreads, even limited gains made in the past decades risk being rolled back. Any lost progress will take years to regain.

• **The world needs women’s leadership to handle a health crisis.** Women leaders are being lauded as doing a disproportionately “great job” on pandemic responses compared to men. Yet just 7.2% of heads of state and 6.2% of heads of government are women, and just 18% of the world’s Health Ministers are women. Women make up only 20% of the WHO Emergency Committee on COVID-19 and for every three men quoted in media coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak, only one woman is quoted. Research shows that women are better equipped for handling a health crisis, including a pandemic; data has shown women to outperform men on emotional intelligence, and to be more empathic, considerate and humble—qualities that may be valued higher in times of crises.

• **COVID-19 responses for everyone benefit from women’s participation.** Women bring different experiences and perspectives, talents and skills to the table. This leads to better informed decisions, more just outcomes, and evolution of ‘group think’ and traditional ways of doing things. Policies that do not consult women or include them in decision-making are simply less effective and can cause harm.

• **Leaders must continue to sound the alarm on COVID 19’s disproportionate impact on women.** Women in politics must be informed and alert the media, leaders and the public on, inter alia, the disproportionate social-economic impact on women who are overrepresented in service and vulnerable employment and increased domestic violence against women which tends to rise during every type of emergency or crisis.
LEGISLATIVE BODIES

- **Legislative bodies have a responsibility to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic with gender sensitivity.** Legislatures can commit to a gender sensitive response by: (1) cultivating a gender sensitive environment during the crisis, prioritizing women’s involvement in the response and adopting gender mainstreaming procedures; (2) tasking and resourcing specific legislative bodies with responsibility for coordinating a gender sensitive response to COVID-19; (3) encouraging MPs and staff to use gender analysis across all policy areas and eliminating gender workplace discrimination/harassment or bullying exacerbated by the crisis, including by amending the standing orders; (4) monitoring and evaluating the gender sensitivity of the crisis response, and preparing for future ‘business disruption’ including by addressing inclusive access for parliamentarians who needs it, and (6) in a climate of shifting priorities and heightened sensitivities, ensuring the mental and physical well-being of elected members, MPs’ staff and parliamentary staff as they carry out responsibilities is crucial.

- **Every public office holder has an obligation to serve women and girls by addressing gender equality as part of their work; in a pandemic, this obligation is even more important to:**
  - **Legislate & Budget:** (1) ensure the government’s emergency legislation, relief packages and budgets have been developed based on sex disaggregated data (as well as age, race and disability); gender impact assessments, and consultations with gender experts, (2) consider whether any tabled bills or pending legislation intended to advance women’s rights will be delayed as a result of COVID-19, what impacts that may have on women, and what measures could be taken to ensure the legislation is not deprioritized (e.g. on ending violence against women, protections for women’s reproductive and sexual health and rights, equal pay, or special measures for women’s representation), and (3) when revising national budgets and allocating/passing special budgets for COVID-19 response, ensure they correspond to women’s needs.
  - **Scrutinize:** (1) ask oral or written questions about special measures taken by the executive to protect women’s income and freedom from violence, and about women’s involvement and expertise consulted in COVID 19 response; (2) initiate and/or nominate women to sit on COVID-19 related parliamentary inquiries, (3) consider the gender policy implications and make visible when COVID-19 related gender discrimination and inequality is uncovered, (4) provide oversight of government responses, scrutinizing what has not done in response to the pandemic, revealing any differential effects which help or harm women of insight of women’s needs, experiences and priorities.
  - **Represent:** (1) reach out to women’s organizations, economists, academics, trade unions, persons with disabilities organizations, line ministries, etc. to get a comprehensive analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on women in their community; (2) channel women constituents’ voices into COVID-19 decision making by organizing virtual town halls/texts/online exchanges; and nominate, or encourage, women health leaders in the community to crisis management teams and pandemic relief task forces.
  - **Act as role models:** (1) get tested for COVID-19, practice physical distancing, wash/sanitize hands, and model adherence to guidelines of health authorities to prioritize public safety; (2) take a respectful, cooperative and collaborative approach to politics, set aside partisanship/competition, and denounce any incidents of violence against women MPs and staff, and give women MPs equal access to ‘the floor’ and media, to showcase their contributions to debate and the crisis response.
  - **Parliamentary diplomacy:** exchange among MPs and parliaments across the world to share experiences and good practices on gender sensitive approaches to and tools for pandemic response.
ELECTIONS

- **COVID-19 and containment measures have significantly affected Member States’ ability to hold elections and will impact on women’s political rights.** Voter registration, voter education, candidate nomination, campaigning, and dispute resolution will be affected. Electoral stakeholders must ensure that women, who are the majority of voters in most countries, are not adversely affected by restrictions, health concerns or care responsibilities, which could impact voter turnout and the inclusiveness of the electoral process. Women candidates’ ability to organize grassroots, face-to-face campaigns will be impeded due to social distancing measures in place and they will face greater difficulties securing political financing due to the pandemic’s economic fallout.

- **Any changes to existing electoral procedures or regulations must consider the full range of risks and costs to, as well as opportunities for women’s political participation.** Elections may be postponed, or proceed with alternate voting, registration or campaigning arrangements that may have both advantages and disadvantages for women’s political participation.

- **Women must be able to exercise their political rights safely and freely, both online and offline.** Before the outbreak, the UN had expressed concern that violence against women in politics and elections had been increasing, along with hate speech and an overall backlash against women’s rights. New forms of intimidation, sexual harassment and hate speech have emerged and spread through online and social media which are in greater use as people increasingly require virtual means of communication and participation.

What we can do & offer

- **Conduct global, regional and local outreach, advocacy & experience sharing,** including by leveraging our unique convening role to create dedicated and inclusive meeting spaces (online and offline) for women leaders to share good practices and information, network and amplify their messages to inform planning and decision making on COVID-19 response, at global, national and regional levels.

- **Policy advice and technical assistance to partners, upon demand,** including on reprogramming or adapting ongoing electoral assistance projects and parliamentary support projects.

- **Participate in relevant UN convened working groups and inter-agency mechanisms** to ensure gender sensitive COVID19 responses and messaging on governance and electoral processes. This includes coordination on UN Electoral Assistance in COVID-19 response and programmes.

- **Promote and encourage the use of temporary special measures (TSMs)** such as gender quotas and commitments to gender balance to ensure the equal representation of women (and/or women’s organizations) in planning and decision making on C-19 response, as well as national health leadership.

- **Support decision-makers on gender-sensitive COVID-19 responses with knowledge products.** Draw on good practices to outline key issues for parliaments and local governments to consider when working on gender-sensitive COVID-19 responses and support parliamentary/local government action on gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19 such as initiatives and/or pledges.

- **Amplify women’s voices and successes in COVID-19 response,** including through social media, by showcasing women leaders’ contributions to the COVID-19 prevention and response measures to promote role models of women leaders in crisis response and inspire further gender responsive measures.
1. **NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS** - Women in national parliaments (single/lower house) as of 1 January 2020:
   - 24.9%: global percentage

2. **GOVERNMENT** - Women heads of state and government, and ministers
   - **21 countries**: a woman holds position of head of state or government as of 1 April 2020.
   - **7.2% Heads of State** (Bolivia (HS/HG), Estonia, Ethiopia, Georgia, Greece, Nepal, San Marino, Singapore, Slovakia, Switzerland (HS/HG), Trinidad & Tobago)
   - **6.2% Heads of Government** (Bangladesh, Barbados, Belgium, Bolivia (HS/HG), Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland (HS/HG))
   - **21.26%: Ministers** (women holding ministerial portfolios)

3. **LOCAL GOVERNMENT** - women in local government:
   - 36% of elected seats in local deliberative bodies, globally, are held by women.

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7. [https://www.womeningh.org/operation-50-50](https://www.womeningh.org/operation-50-50)
10. Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) data, 2020.
11. Data compiled by UN Women based on information provided by Permanent Missions to the United Nations. Only elected Heads of State have been taken into account.