Gender Equality
Update No.15

6 May 2020

Story: Voices of the Front-liners

"For us, it all started when 175 Nepali students were brought back to Nepal from Wuhan, China. The flight arrived on 15 February and my team was the first to enter the quarantine facility on 16 February. My team did not hesitate to volunteer to take samples. Some of my team members are as young as 21 and some have babies at home, but all of them were ready. We worked the whole night and produced 175 reports the following day.

For me, as a Director, staying late at the lab has become the norm. In addition to the technical work, I also have to manage logistics, such as arranging transportation and food for my team. It is a very difficult time for us, and I have to keep them motivated. I talk to them whenever I sense they are feeling down. I tell them their safety is our priority. Things have changed in my personal life too. I have sent away my daughter with my husband to our hometown, Janakpur, which is away from my duty station in Kathmandu. Since then, I have been living in my apartment alone. My parents live just 2 kilometres away and I used to visit them three times a week, but it has been almost three weeks that I haven't seen them. My daughter calls me and tells me how much she misses me. I miss my family too, but I fear risking their lives; therefore, keeping a distance is vital."

Dr. Runa Jha is the Chief Pathologist and Director at the National Public Health Laboratory in Nepal, which is linked with 277 government laboratories across the country and is the only lab authorized to conduct COVID-19 testing. Jha, along with 67 team members, is playing a crucial role in the front-line response to COVID-19.

"The enforcement of lockdown to prevent COVID-19 transmission has triggered unintended consequences for the poorest and most vulnerable. For instance, families in my neighborhood, who rely on daily wages from informal work, are having fewer meals, borrowing money, and living in despair as they are now deprived of their only source of income. Moreover, elderly, single women, Dalit women, daily wage earners, and poor families are most susceptible to food insecurity. It seems like hunger may kill the poor and vulnerable before COVID-19 does.

As a social rights activist, I must go further than just sharing information about COVID-19. I must support those who come to me for support. Who will fight for the rights of the poor, vulnerable, and single women, if not us?

So, I try to help people of my community through different means such as providing in-kind support, groceries from my husband's shop, calling or visiting the municipality office for fair distribution of relief packages, and providing food aid. Apart from that, I also use my social media presence to seek support from generous and helping hands within the country and beyond. I have been able to collect food aid for more than 17 families through my social media activism. I also provide counseling support to those in need as I have worked as a health counselor and social mobilizer with Women's Rehabilitation Center (WOREC), a national non-governmental organization, in the past."

Rita Mahato is on the front lines to support and respond to the needs of her Madhesi Community in Siraha district, Province 2 of Nepal. She is a feminist who has worked for over 17 years fighting for women's rights in her community. In particular, Mahato advocates for ending child marriage, dowry, domestic violence, polygamy, violence against women, and gender discrimination.

THE FIRST 100 DAYS OF COVID-19 IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC: A GENDER LENS

This document provides a rapid and preliminary review of the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic 100 days after the first cases were reported to the World Health Organization (WHO). It aims to:

- present a snapshot of the gender dimensions of the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic in the Asia-Pacific region.
- capture promising practices for integrating gender in preparedness and response planning; and
- propose lessons learned and strategic entry points to mitigate the socio-economic impacts for women and girls.
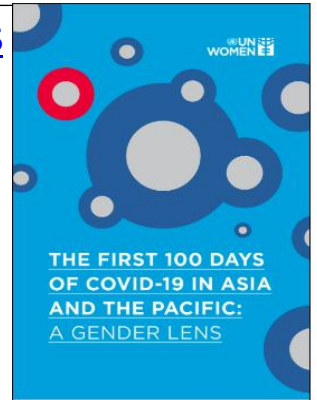
Key Recommendations

Women, Peace and Security and COVID-19

- Promote women's full, equal and meaningful participation in leadership and decision-making roles related to COVID-19, including in conflict-affected and fragile settings.
- Security sector-driven COVID-19 responses must be proportionate, gender-sensitive and protect women's human rights, including through women's leadership in law enforcement.
- Women's civil society must be supported to monitor and document security sector action, access to justice, and governance to promote transparency and accountability for women's human rights under national emergency conditions.
- Women must lead in social cohesion measures including countering discrimination and hate speech and the prevention of COVID-19 becoming a driver of violence and conflict.
- Preparation for early recovery must be inclusive of women's socio-economic needs and priorities.

Women's Economic Empowerment

Governments should ensure there are targeted interventions to protect women farmers and market vendors, including:

- ensuring markets continue to be safe, clean, well ventilated and crowds are controlled,
- conditional cash transfers to vendors and farmers,
- free inputs such as seeds to ensure farmers are able to meet possible increases in domestic demand,
- subsidies (for example, if price controls are put in place),
- food rations/support to ensure basic needs are met,
- support with free or subsidized childcare,
- proving safe transport to markets, and
- flexible lines of credit to informal workers backed by bank guarantee

Gender and Disaster Risk Reduction

- Adapt existing gender profiles and vulnerability analyses to account for compounded risks due to COVID-19.
- Engage and resource women's organizations and networks already active in disaster risk reduction efforts in programming to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19.
- Adapt existing methodologies, such as Post-Disaster Needs Assessments, for use in capturing the gendered socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19.
- Incorporate lessons learnt on the gendered impacts of COVID-19, as well as good practices, into the development of local and national disaster riskreduction plans.

Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls

- Integrating the prevention of violence against women and girls into COVID-19 response plans developed by Governments.
- Ensuring essential services are functioning and prioritize prevention, preparedness and response to violence against women and girls including police and justice, health, and social services.
- Front-line health and social service providers need to be provided with updated information and adequate protective equipment to continue their work in a safe environment.
- Promote social media, radio and/or television programmes and more generally reassess communication needs that specifically address violence against women and girls in the context of COVID-19.
- Equipping essential services with technology tools and training to continue to provide counselling and other services, with support from the private sector.
- Supporting civil society organizations to have information technology connectivity: through data, mobile WIFI hotspot devices, generators to keep the office and equipment running.