



GENDER ALERT ON COVID-19 AFGHANISTAN

May 14, 2020

Issue IV: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Burden of Care and Unpaid Domestic Labor

Following the previous Gender Alerts,¹ UN Women issues this fourth alert to continue to highlight the gender specific impacts of COVID-19 in Afghanistan. This alert focuses on the implications of COVID-19 on the already high burden of care and unpaid domestic labor responsibilities that women experience in Afghanistan. It also addresses the ways in which these challenges represent an expression of existing inequalities and lack of realization of women's human rights, including the right to work, the right to education, the right to healthcare and more. It assesses the overarching gendered impacts as described in previous alerts, but also outlines how the impact of lockdown measures on the hard won progress for women in formal employment, and the vulnerabilities and lack of social safety nets for women in informal and unmonetized sectors of the economy, including domestic work, may increase women's economic insecurity and domestic or care burden across all women's lives.

The alert concludes with a set of preliminary recommendations for consideration by national and international stakeholders to foster the protection and promotion of women's human rights as they relate to the burden of care and unpaid domestic work. The alert draws upon recent recom-

mendations highlighted in the Secretary-General's report on Gender and COVID-19. It also draws upon specific recommendations for Afghanistan made by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women during its 75th session, which have become particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic. UN Women Afghanistan is committed to supporting the Government of Afghanistan, the United Nations, and international and national partners to recognize and value the hidden work that women are doing and to move towards preventive measures and responses that address the full scope of rights challenges that prevent women's full equality on these issues in Afghanistan.

CONTEXT & EMERGING GENDER IMPACTS

Globally, there are gross imbalances in the gender distribution of unpaid care work. Before COVID-19 became a pandemic, women were doing three times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men. As formal and informal supply of schooling and childcare declines with COVID-19, the demand for unpaid childcare falls even more heavily on women, not only because of the existing structure of the workforce, but also because of social norms. This limits

¹Issue I: Gender Alert on COVID 19 in Afghanistan: Ensuring a Gender Sensitive Humanitarian Response, UN Women (24 April 2020); Issue II: Gender Alert on COVID 19 in Afghanistan: Ensuring Access to Services for Survivors of Violence Against Women and Girls, UN Women (30 April 2020); Issue III: Gender Alert on COVID 19 in Afghanistan: the Impact of COVID-19 on the Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda (7 May 2020).

women's ability to work, particularly when jobs cannot be carried out remotely. Where remote work is possible, stress and multitasking will take a disproportionate toll on women's health and well-being.

In Afghanistan, the question of women's role in the economy, whether through unpaid care and domestic labor or formal or informal labor, is a challenging one. It is also, however, a pressing one for the majority of Afghans who, in 2019, ranked women's lack of employment opportunities among their top concerns, just behind "lack of educational opportunities" and "lack of rights".² And although male and female approval of women working outside the home has slightly increased in 2019, perceptions, attitudes and expectations among Afghans of women's work outside the home remains complex and likely tied to both economic need as much as any growing support for women's rights.³ A recent time-use survey conducted by UN Women, confirmed that women are providing the majority of unpaid care and domestic labor in Afghanistan. Women spent an average of 4.6 hours on childcare as compared to 2.3 hours for men, 3.4 hours caring for others as compared to 1.3 hours for men, 3.6 hours prepared food, as compared to .4 hours for men, and 7.3 hours on cleaning as compared to 1.6 hours for men. In sum, women spend an average of 18.7 hours on unpaid care and domestic labor as compared to 5.6 for men.⁴

There are structural and social realities in Afghanistan that not only impact these roles and forms of labor that women undertake inside their homes, taking on the majority of unpaid care and domestic labor, but also outside their homes. The barriers to women's participation in the formal economy and disproportionate representation in unpaid care and domestic labor are linked to the status of women's human rights in Afghanistan, which if further protected and promoted could lead to transformative change for women's economic empowerment and girl's education. This includes through pathways to greater access to education, greater valuing of unpaid labor and domestic care, and greater attention to the right to work.

The implications of the spread of COVID-19 pandemic in Afghanistan have already begun to exacerbate the already high burden of care and unpaid domestic labor responsibilities that women experience in Afghanistan. However, the potential for a negative long-term impact on the gains made for women's formal employment, labor protections in informal employment, and acknowledgement of the value of domestic labor are high. These challenges repre-

sent an expression of existing inequalities and lack of realization of women's human rights, including the right to work, the right to education, the right to healthcare and more. The below categories represent emerging gendered impacts for international and national stakeholders to consider in their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Increased vulnerability for women working in domestic labor, unpaid care and the informal economy

Most women who work in Afghanistan also do so in the informal sector, with nearly three quarters working in home-based craft industries. In addition to unrecognized unpaid care and domestic labor where women are dependent upon either the safety nets provided through the formal labor of a family member or social safety net that is often not available or accessible, women remain overrepresented in the informal economy. Here, there are little social and public safety protections as well. These vulnerable forms of labor can increase women's risk for poverty in times of crisis, including the context of COVID-19, as they may be left out of formal social protection measures that directly engage with workers in the formal economy.⁶

The COVID-19 pandemic has added to the existing challenges of ongoing armed conflict and an already weakened health system and has now strained the full scope of essential services. In this environment, loss of informal work can lead to increased vulnerability to extreme poverty. The long-term and far reaching economic impacts, such as long-term job loss, soaring prices, and more are all warning signs that with an already struggling economy, many Afghans, particularly women are facing further worsening economic conditions. This reality is only exacerbated by the economic projections that demonstrate the links between ongoing conflict, gender inequality and economic recovery and growth. It is imperative during this time that all economic recovery packages, including for immediate relief, and long-term economic growth work directly to address the needs of women irrespective of their access to formal employment.

Potential to impact women's employment and to cause a "permanent exit" from formal economy

In Afghanistan, as in many countries, the gains made for women's participation in the formal economy remain fragile.⁷ There is increasing concern among international and national stakeholders, that even women in the formal

²Asia Foundation 2019 Survey of the Afghan People. Among the biggest problems facing women, respondents for the Asia Foundation's annual survey identified lack of educational opportunities as the biggest problem facing women (43.2%), followed by lack of rights (34.1%), lack of employment opportunities (24.1%), violence (18.1%), lack of services (13.7%), and economic concerns (9.6%).

³Ibid. Male approval has increased 8 percentage points (60.8 per cent in 2018 to 68.8 per cent in 2019) and female approval also rose slightly from 79.8 to 83.1 per cent. In disaggregating by income, the results also suggest that "this growing approval for women working outside the home is related to the economy as much as to women's rights."

⁴<https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/05/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-unpaid-care-and-domestic-work-in-afghanistan>

⁵World Bank, Gender Dimensions of the COVID-19 Pandemic (16 April 2020).

⁶UN Secretary-General's policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women (9 April 2020).

⁷UN Women, Gender-Responsive Prevention and Management of the COVID-19 Pandemic: From Emergency Response to Recovery & Resilience (27 March 2020).

sector where progress towards their participation and inclusion has taken place over the last two decades, will be negatively impacted by the economic repercussions of COVID-19. Already present and now exacerbated economic and social pressures, including new unpaid care and labor demands, that come alongside the COVID-19 pandemic could cause a “permanent exit” for women from the formal economy.⁸ Women as a whole, including those in formal sectors have already seen increased burdens of caretaking for children, family members, and their homes with school closings, confinement and lack of access to essential services.⁹ Some trends are suggesting that they may also be disproportionately affected by cuts and lay-offs. Such impacts risk rolling back the already fragile gains made in female labor force participation, limiting women’s ability to support themselves and their families. Among the many risks that must be monitored and responded to are the experiences of women who have entered the formal labor market and are now facing job loss, layoff, and other challenges that threaten their employment, specifically disproportionate layoffs and increased unpaid care and domestic labor demands.

Quantifying, recognizing and integrating domestic labor and unpaid care into valuations

Supporting women with high burdens of care and who may also engage in unpaid domestic labor requires first acknowledging and valuing this work. It is essential to ensure that the protection and promotion of the full scope of women’s human rights, including the right to education, right to work and beyond, are also at the center of any response to COVID-19. The Government and international and national development actors have been hard at work over the last two decades to strengthen the social safety net in Afghanistan, as well as opportunities to improve women’s rights to education, work, essential services and more. However, among the many pressing recommendations made by the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women for Afghanistan in 2020, the Committee called for the quantification and inclusion of “unremunerated domestic activities of women in gross national product.”¹⁰ Many women’s civil society organizations and gender equality advocates have underscored that the exclusion of this labor in the calculation of a country’s productivity is fundamentally a result of the devaluing of work that is traditionally considered women’s work. Many have now begun to call it the “invisibilization” of women’s work. Increasing opportunity for women to work in the formal sector as well as changing the narrative that unpaid care and domestic labor are women’s work in Afghanistan are two strategies that must be pursued simultaneously. Changing this norm will require long-term investment in under-

standing women’s time use and work with communities to challenge the perception that unpaid care and domestic work is just for women or that women should not work outside the home.

In the immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, relevant actors should consider the ways in which they can incorporate communications, advocacy and dialogue to support men in taking on increased domestic labor and care responsibilities. This moment can also create an opportunity for families and households to reconsider sharing of the burden of care, for the benefit of women, men, families, communities and ultimately, to create a more gender equal Afghanistan.

Ensuring women benefit from COVID-19 economic recovery programs, alongside post-conflict economic recovery programs

Finally, engaging women and women’s rights and labor advocates is the only way to ensure that COVID-19 recovery programs adequately respond to the needs of women and are designed in ways that ensure they are accessible to them. Social protection and fiscal responses are more effective when the gender dimensions of the crisis itself, its long-term impacts, and the potential dynamics around the response are considered.¹¹ Not only is it essential to recognize the disparities of experiences, but to also recognize the realities that women face when trying to access economic recovery programs, either due to social, cultural, or functional limitations on movement, but also in terms of accessibility across a range of intersectional experiences, such as age, disability, social status, and more. They must also incorporate sex disaggregated data.¹² This is particularly true in countries impacted by conflict. Post-conflict economic recovery programs may also be relevant and simultaneously under development. Both types of economic recovery work in countries affected by conflict, such as Afghanistan, are critical opportunities to ensure that women are equal beneficiaries in the reinvestment that comes along with efforts towards peace.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The following preliminary recommendations reflect an overall need for national and international stakeholders to foster the protection and promotion of women’s human rights as they relate to the burden of care and unpaid domestic work.

National and international actors can contribute to responses that integrate transformative approaches to women’s economic empowerment, including in design and delivery of the pandemic response through the following actions:

⁸World Bank, Gender Dimensions of the COVID-19 Pandemic (16 April 2020).

⁹UN Women, The First 100 Days of COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific (2020), pp. 18.

¹⁰CEDAW/C/AFG/CO/3 (2020).

¹¹UN Secretary-General’s policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women (9 April 2020).

¹²Ibid.

1. Integrate concrete gender analysis into the planning, development, and delivery of social protection measures to ensure that they reach beyond formal economy participation and can reach women in the informal sector and engaged in unpaid care and domestic labor.
2. Ensure that all economic recovery packages, including for immediate relief, and long-term economic growth work directly to address the needs of women irrespective of their access to formal employment.
3. Ensure that women working in the informal economy are covered by labour legislation and social protection.¹³
4. Analyze the gendered impacts of job loss in Afghanistan to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in the formal economy to ensure that gains made can be preserved and built upon.
5. Consider programming and research that contribute to a greater understanding of how unpaid care and domestic labor contributes to economic growth, peace and stability in order to progress towards quantifying and including “the unremunerated domestic activities of women in gross national product.”¹⁴
6. Consider long-term approaches to responding to the barriers to women’s formal employment that can support relevant duty bearers and stakeholders to advance strategies and policies to boost women’s participation.¹⁵
7. Build upon UN Women’s recent time use survey, and other existing data, to demonstrate the value of including time-use surveys as part of national household surveys with a view to measuring and putting a value on the unremunerated domestic activities of women, and use such information as a basis for additional policies on the advancement of women;
8. Integrate communications, advocacy and dialogue efforts to support men in taking on increased domestic labor and care responsibilities, including by participating in UN Women’s upcoming #SharetheCare campaign.



¹³CEDAW/C/AFG/CO/3 (2020).

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.