



GENDER ALERT ON COVID-19 AFGHANISTAN



June 4, 2020



Issue VII: Women's participation and leadership in COVID-19 response

UN Women issues this seventh alert to continue to highlight the gender specific impacts of COVID-19 in Afghanistan. Across each of the previous alerts, UN Women has made recommendations related to the leadership and meaningful participation of women in the COVID-19 response. This alert focuses on why women's leadership and meaningful participation is not only required from a rights-based approach, but also why it can lead to more sustainable responses to crisis that build longer term peace and stability. Generally, the exclusion of women from participating in the design, development, and implementation of crisis responses or, for example in peace and security processes, is rooted in pre-existing gender inequalities and patterns of exclusion. The follow alert therefore roots the analysis of women's exclusion in the existing status of women's leadership and participation in public life in Afghanistan. It details the evidence demonstrating why and how women's participation and leadership leads to effective, and sustainable approaches in crisis and conflict affected countries, including as it relates to COVID-19.

This alert concludes with a set of recommendations for consideration by national and international stakeholders.

UN Women Afghanistan is committed to advancing the rights of, and meeting the needs of women and girls, including through the COVID-19 crisis. This alert serves to advance this aim, by providing a basis for an informed discussion on the importance women's meaningful participation and leadership in political and humanitarian action to ensure gender-responsive and sustainable responses to COVID-19.

CONTEXT & EMERGING GENDER IMPACTS

As outlined in the last alert,¹ in Afghanistan there is a wealth of strong women leaders and activists with expertise on a range of issues, ready to contribute to Afghanistan's development, peacebuilding and COVID-19 response efforts. However, women in Afghanistan remain underrepresented among political, health, humanitarian and economic decision-makers. Despite recent progress, the number of women in high-level public and non-public offices remains low. Women currently represent 28% of seats in Afghanistan's parliament (the country's constitution reserves at least 27%² of seats for women).³ In 2018, the civil service comprised 27.33 % of women.⁴

¹UN Women, Gender Alert, Afghanistan, Issue VI: Women, Peace & Security and Ensuring Women's Meaningful Participation in the Afghan Peace Process.

²Amoo-Adare, Epifania. (2015). Afghan Women's Representation in Politics: Implementing the Reserved Seats Quota System.

³World Bank. Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%). Accessed on 1 June 2020.

⁴Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (2019). Participation of Women in Civil Service Must Reach 30% this Year.

There are many barriers to women's equal participation and leadership in the public sphere. In Afghanistan, these barriers span across social, community and family pressures; forms of violence that include harassment, intimidation, physical violence, forced resignation, and assassinations. This violence features as a direct response to their lack of adherence to traditional gender norms and stereotypes.⁵ These realities affect women politicians, journalists, peacebuilders, humanitarians, health workers, civil society actors, and more. When voicing their political opinions on social media, women also experience high levels of online violence, sexism and hatred. Online violence against women further limits women's rights to free and full participation, freedom of expression, safety and privacy. It is being used to threaten and silence women human rights defenders, journalists and politicians who are directly targeted, threatened, harassed and insulted because of their work.⁶ In addition to the above, women also face basic limitations to their participation in public life in their immediate communities and beyond, including lack of financial resources, skills development, information, access to basic services, education and more. Each of the previous alerts have underscored the far-reaching impact of gender inequality across each of these areas. All of the above limits women's say and influence in decision making processes at both the national, provincial and local levels.

SPECIFIC AREAS FOR ATTENTION

Benefits to women's meaningful participation and leadership in COVID-19 responses

Across every sphere, from health to the economy, peacebuilding to development, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their gender.⁷ Considering the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including on unpaid care and domestic work, and violence against women and girls, as outlined in previous gender alerts, it is critical that the response to COVID-19 is gender sensitive. However, in Afghanistan, women continue to be under-represented in health, humanitarian and COVID-19 leadership and decision-making bodies. In Afghanistan, the National Disaster Management Office and other structures such as Provincial Disaster Committees, the Coronavirus Awareness Committee to the Ministry of Public Health, Clusters and other response mechanisms are heavily male dominated. In COVID-19 response and recovery, existing lack of diversity and gender representation in decision-making means that the needs

and voices of some of the most vulnerable communities are left out.⁸ As highlighted in the first Gender Alert on Ensuring a Gender Sensitive Humanitarian Response, responses that do not incorporate gender analysis not only risk exacerbating gender inequalities, but are proven to do so.

Gender-responsive programming and policies acknowledge and address women and girls' different and unique experiences and needs, address the causes of gender inequality – including gender norms and roles – and include strategies to support women and girls' empowerment.

For COVID-19 approaches to be responsive and address the gendered impact of COVID-19, women must be at the center of COVID-19 recovery efforts. This starts with women's equal representation and participation in decision-making. Ensuring women's meaningful participation and leadership in the COVID-19 response design and implementation is essential to meet the needs of women, girls and marginalized groups. Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is a critical component of achieving inclusive, effective and life-saving responses to COVID-19. The COVID-19 crisis represents an opportunity to empower women as key leaders and decision makers to respond effectively and to build longer-term resilience and social cohesion of communities.

Lack of diversity and failing to leverage women's expertise and talent in decision-making can limit an effective response.⁹ For the COVID-19 response to be effective and responsive to the needs of all Afghan people, it is critical to engage a range of women leaders and activists at the national, provincial and local levels, including marginalized groups. The needs of all women and girls, including women with physical and intellectual disabilities, women of particular ethnicities, women in prison, refugees and migrants and internally displaced women must be considered.¹⁰ This can be achieved with the meaningful participation of women's organizations and grassroots movements in national, provincial and local consultations. Meaningful representation and participation require additional support to overcome regular challenges women and women's organizations face including the burden of care and domestic labor, violence and threat of violence, limited access to education and formal employment. Women and marginalized groups must be empowered and supported to not

⁵NOREF (2013). Women, peace and security in post-conflict and peacebuilding contexts.

⁶Human Rights Council (2018). Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective. A/HRC/38/47.

⁷UN Women and United Nations Secretariat (2020). UN Secretary-General's policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women.

⁸Bali S, Dhatt R, Lal A. Gender and COVID-19 Working Group, et al (2020). Off the back burner: diverse and gender-inclusive decision-making for COVID-19 response and recovery. BMJ Global Health 2020;5:e002595.

⁹Bali S, Dhatt R, Lal A. Gender and COVID-19 Working Group, et al (2020). Off the back burner: diverse and gender-inclusive decision-making for COVID-19 response and recovery. BMJ Global Health 2020;5:e002595.

¹⁰Universal Values: Leave No One Behind (LNOB) <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/leave-no-one-behind>.

only be engaged but also to have their voices and needs accounted for. This can include facilitating safe and equal workplaces, the provision of childcare options, making information about VAWG services available, holding perpetrators accountable, adding safety measures in schools for girls and quotas in employment for women. Measures to promote gender equality and inclusiveness in decision-making at all levels will strengthen both national and local COVID-19 efforts and ensure greater engagement of those who are most affected in planning of response and recovery for effective and sustainable responses. Women and marginalized communities are not only vulnerable populations, they can serve as agents of change whose contributions can improve epidemic response and recovery.¹¹

In addition to the need to engage women for gender-responsive approaches, there are strong benefits to women's participation and leadership in the COVID-19 response, not only for women and girls but for everyone. Diverse and gender inclusive decision-making will promote greater accountability for an adaptive response and sustainable recovery to COVID-19. Meaningful and inclusive representation of women and marginalized groups leads to smarter, ethical and more effective decision-making, especially in crises.¹² As the United Nations Secretary General António Guterres said on 28 February 2020: "Women's inequality should shame us all. Because it is not only unacceptable; it is stupid. Only through the equal participation of women can we benefit from the intelligence, experience and insights of all of humanity."¹³

Globally, women leaders are being lauded as doing a "great job" on pandemic responses compared to men.¹⁴ Research has shown that governments with women in elected and administrative leadership positions are likely better prepared to meet women's needs and protect women's rights during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁵ The COVID-19 crisis is showing that women's leadership supports healthier and more equal societies that place social and environmental wellbeing at the core of national policymaking.¹⁶

Analysis of the number of COVID-19 deaths in 35 countries have found that countries with women in positions of leadership suffered six times fewer confirmed deaths from COVID-19 than countries with governments led by men. Female-led governments were more effective and rapid at flattening the epidemic's curve, with peaks in

daily deaths roughly six times lower than in countries ruled by men. Finally, the average number of days with confirmed deaths was 34 in countries ruled by women and 48 in countries ruled by men.¹⁷

This is supported by studies that have shown that women are better equipped for handling health crisis, including a pandemic.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ Women bring different experiences and perspectives, talents and skills to the table. Women are users of health services, and they are agents of change in health, making critical contributions as parents, front-line responders, health promoters, influencers and decision-makers.²⁰ At the front-line community level, women are well placed to identify local trends and responsive policies, including signals of outbreaks and general health conditions, and hold significant expertise across a range of issues pertinent to the COVID-19 response. Considering the differential gendered impact, women can highlight different concerns and bring different perspectives, experiences and solutions.

Diverse and inclusive representation and leadership leads to better and more informed decisions and more just outcomes that are more responsive to the different needs of a range of people, including women, girls and marginalized groups. Women's expertise, knowledge and qualities should be utilized to their full potential for long-term effective, sustainable and inclusive approaches to the COVID-19 response. Therefore, the humanitarian and political communities have to ensure meaningful engagement of women, adolescent girls, and marginalized groups in leadership and decision-making roles throughout the COVID-19 preparedness and response by using quotas, targets, and other mechanisms at global, national, and local levels.²¹

In Afghanistan, women have stepped up and are at the front-line of the crisis, leading their communities' response to the pandemic. Women members of parliament and women's right activists have mobilized and are effectively responding to the crisis and supporting people who have contracted the virus. Women-led initiatives such as advocacy, awareness raising and mask making are supporting efforts to prevent and respond to the pandemic.

¹¹Bali S, Dhath R, Lal A Gender and COVID-19 Working Group, et al (2020). Off the back burner: diverse and gender-inclusive decision-making for COVID-19 response and recovery. BMJ Global Health 2020;5:e002595

¹²Bali S, Dhath R, Lal A Gender and COVID-19 Working Group, et al (2020). Off the back burner: diverse and gender-inclusive decision-making for COVID-19 response and recovery. BMJ Global Health 2020;5:e002595.

¹³<https://twitter.com/antonioGuterres/status/1233183587329101825?lang=en>

¹⁴CNN (2020). Women leaders are doing a disproportionately great job at handling the pandemic. So why aren't there more of them? 16 April 2020.

¹⁵The Gender Policy Report (2020). We Need Women's Leadership More Than Ever During COVID-19. We Need Women's Leadership More Than Ever During COVID-19. 5 May 2020.

¹⁶Medical X Press (2020). Countries with female leaders suffer six times fewer COVID-19 deaths. 29 May 2020.

¹⁷Medical X Press (2020). Countries with female leaders suffer six times fewer COVID-19 deaths. 29 May 2020.

¹⁸Forbes (2020). Are Women Better At Managing The Covid19 Pandemic? 10 April 2020.

¹⁹Harvard Business Review (2020). Why Do So Many Incompetent Men Become Leaders? 22 Mars 2013.

²⁰Bali S, Dhath R, Lal A Gender and COVID-19 Working Group, et al (2020). Off the back burner: diverse and gender-inclusive decision-making for COVID-19 response and recovery. BMJ Global Health 2020;5:e002595.

²¹CARE and IRC (2020). Global Rapid Gender Analysis For Covid-19.

Marginalization of women's groups and networks

Women's organizations and women-led Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are critical partners, but face real challenges to be included in COVID-19 response.²² Local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and NGOs are already playing a critical role in responding to COVID-19, building relationships with local government and community leaders. In this context, the intersection of gender and localization is particularly important. Local and grassroots women's organizations and local women's leadership must be supported and strengthened, including through women's networks.²³ Yet, globally, the level of funding to national and local NGOs stands at just 0.1 percent of total funding reported for COVID-19 response to date²⁴ and funding for women-focused organizations is even more limited. For instance, violence against women and girls remains a particularly underfunded area of humanitarian response, with insufficient funding to effectively address the scale of the issue. Violence against women funding accounted for only 0.12 percent of all humanitarian funding – which represents only one third of funding requested.²⁵ It is critical to fund women's groups and networks for them to continue to their essential and life-saving activities, and to support scaling up their work in response to new challenges arising from the COVID-19 crisis.²⁶

Overarching risk for regression on women's participation and leadership due to COVID-19

The impact of the pandemic in Afghanistan threatens all gains made for gender equality and women's human rights. As outlined in the fourth Gender Alert on the Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Burden of Care and Unpaid Domestic Labor, the outbreak amplifies women's domestic burden and makes their share of household responsibilities even heavier, with children out-of-school, heightened care needs of older persons and overwhelmed health services. Rigid gender norms and roles, widespread violence and unpaid care and domestic work were already limiting Afghan women's educational, economic and political opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic creates additional barriers that further limit women's opportunities for meaningful participation and leadership in the public sphere and to influence the COVID-19 response.

As illustrated in the context of the women, peace and security agenda in the 3rd Gender Alert on the Impact of COVID-19 on the Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and the 6th Gender Alert on Women, Peace & Security and Ensuring Women's Meaningful Participa-

pation in the Afghan Peace Process, due to the health crisis, civil society and women's organizations now face additional barriers to gathering and advocating for influence in key processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Women's participation and leadership represents an untapped resource for COVID-19 response, but for them to achieve their potential as leaders, they must be empowered, capacitated and resourced.

1. Overall promote women's meaningful participation and leadership and gender balanced teams in all institutions and organisations.
2. Promote and commit to gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19 by engaging women's participation at all levels, as leaders, beneficiaries and equal partners through legislation, advocacy initiatives and/or pledges.
3. Commit and take steps to ensure that decision making bodies on the COVID-19 response in Afghanistan, including task forces, crisis management teams, legislative, policy, and budgetary working groups and other relevant national and local government institutions, are gender balanced between men and women, and include gender experts and engagement with grassroots organizations and service providers.
4. Consult representatives from national gender mechanisms, community-based organizations, civil society organizations, women's organizations and women's rights activists in response planning and decision making to help guarantee a gender perspective.
5. Facilitate forums and platforms for women and girls to obtain information and voice their needs and priorities related to COVID-19 (e.g. through publicly available or supported virtual townhalls, outreach initiatives and campaigns), including at local levels and in remote areas to reach all women and girls.
6. Encourage civil society, national gender equality mechanisms, women in the media and academia to play their fullest role in advocating for women's participation, access to information, the advancement of women's interests and the provision of gender responsive services.
7. Working in close cooperation with local administrations and authorities, extend information, protection materials, funding and additional capacity to ensure full participation and leadership of women in remote areas and in communities that are underserved and/or where women are currently underrepresented in decision making.

²²<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/GiHA%20WG%20analysis%20%20brief.pdf>

²³GBV AoR Asia Pacific, UN Women (2020). The COVID-19 Outbreak and Gender: Regional Analysis and Recommendations from Asia and the Pacific.

²⁴Charter For Change (2020). Charter For Change statement on the revised UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan on Covid19.

²⁵IRC and VOICE (2019). Where's the Money? How the Humanitarian System is Failing to Fund an End of Violence Against Women and Girls.

²⁶GBV AoR Asia Pacific, UN Women (2020). The COVID-19 Outbreak and Gender: Regional Analysis and Recommendations from Asia and the Pacific.

8. Support the work of feminist movements and grass-roots organizations to freely mobilize communities and make visible the frontline care work of women in COVID-19 response.
9. Conduct rapid gender analysis to collect data and information about the gendered impact of COVID-19, and the gender dynamics that will affect and impact women and girls' access to services and support, in order to inform the COVID-19 response.
10. Encourage the collection of national sex disaggregated data and information on COVID-19 and on the gendered impacts of COVID-19 and of related policies/budgets under consideration. Where collecting data, include equal numbers of women as men as participants, collecting information from women directly on their situation, needs and opinions, rather than through male family-members. Communicate and make publicly available such data.
11. Ensure that data and background points on women's leadership and participation in COVID-19 response and recovery is included in official analysis and tracking reports.

