



Women, peace and human security

a guidance note
on parliamentary engagement
during and post-Covid-19



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COVID-19 and the threat to human security

The spread of COVID-19 across the globe has been responsible for untold human misery, for those who have died or fallen gravely ill, for their families, and for everyone who has experienced its direct or indirect consequences. It is proving, moreover, to be a significant threat to human security globally, exposing and magnifying faults in the economic and social order. The global economic crisis that it has provoked is translating into mass unemployment, economic recession, disrupted supply chains, and food and resource insecurity. Fragility is already manifesting across a range of development settings, through increased authoritarianism; stigmatization; social unrest; the disruption of existing political processes; and the proliferation of misinformation.

Gendered impacts of the pandemic

The impact of the COVID-19 response is deeply gendered. There is a heightened risk of SGBV, exploitation, and abuse arising from movement restriction, financial loss and stress, and economic disempowerment. Services essential to the health, safety, protection and recovery of women and girls – such as sexual, reproductive, maternal and child health care; the police and justice sector response; social protection, including safe accommodation, emergency helplines and shelter, and counselling) are being deprioritized in many settings. Those already most vulnerable, including internally displaced women and migrant workers, are especially affected by these hardships and vulnerabilities. Peace and security gains are at stake. Crucially, in this 20th anniversary year of Security Council Resolution 1325, the gains most threatened include advances made on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

Virtually every society and community depend on women for safety and resilience during the crisis, from essential care, childcare, domestic work, to maintaining other essential sectors such as retail and food supply. Women healthcare and community workers comprise more than 70 percent of the frontline pandemic workforce.¹ Women continue to be undervalued, systemically excluded from decision-making (including on the pandemic-related security challenges) and exposed to multiple forms of discrimination and violence in both the public and the private space. Their personal levels of agency and choice are severely restricted. In fragile settings, women are further marginalized to the periphery of peace and political solutions, and their decision-making power and access to information is further diminished.

WPS agenda as a blueprint for responding to and building back better from the crisis

The WPS agenda proposes a people-centric vision for human security through a gendered lens.² The principles of WPS apply equally to all societal shocks, to conflict, and to the COVID response. Efforts to contain the virus and to recover from the global shock to human security and development can only fully succeed if they integrate gender perspectives, effectively protect women from violence, and guarantee equal access to services, information and protection. Equally importantly, women must have equal opportunities to shape and influence every aspect of the response and recovery.

Parliamentary leadership for a WPS-aligned response and recovery

In the context of the vision articulated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the WPS agenda highlights a critical forward pathway for parliaments in all development and peace settings. In systemic partnership with civil society, parliaments, by virtue of their responsibility for representation, are a democratic channel for articulating people's needs – including on what makes them safe and adequately provided for. Through their responsibility for oversight, parliaments should in turn assess the extent to which such needs are met by the government. Especially in fragile and conflict-affected contexts where justice and security concerns may be more at the forefront, providing civil society with meaningful opportunities for inclusive dialogue and engagement in the parliamentary process is key to advancing gender equality and social cohesion, while upholding human rights and the rule of law.

In the immediate term, this requires parliaments to analyze and oversee their government's COVID-19 response and recovery efforts with a view to assessing their evidence base; proportionality; effectiveness; efficiency; the adequacy of their protection of human rights; and the extent to which they meet the needs of those most at risk of being left behind. In the longer term, it calls for them to press their governments for a vision of building a more just, sustainable, and resilient society, translated into policies and programmes that demonstrate deep lessons learned from the pandemic.

1 WHO, *Gender equity in the health workforce: Analysis of 104 countries*. Health Workforce Working Paper 1. Available at: https://www.who.int/hrh/resources/gender_equity-health_workforce_analysis/en/

2 Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, *Women peace and security in the time of corona*. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2020/03/25/women-peace-and-security-in-the-time-of-corona/>

Perhaps most importantly, there is an urgent need for parliaments to act to increase women's participation and leadership both during the recovery and beyond, on the path towards 2030. The stark gender gaps in COVID-19 decision-making and response are shown to result in response plans that do not consider the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and girls. By the same token, countries with higher levels of women in decision-making have responded better to the gendered impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls.³ In the long run, having more women in leadership⁴ will be critical to addressing systemic causes of exclusion, discrimination, and violence against them; and empowering their contribution to building society back better.

UNDP: building parliamentary capacity on Women, Peace and Security on the path beyond recovery, towards 2030

UNDP assists partners from across the governance landscape in laying the foundations for a fair and just transition to the future, beyond the recovery and towards 2030, with the SDGs as a compass. At the heart of its integrated post-COVID-19 governance offer are a renewed pursuit of peace and decisive moves to tackle gender inequalities and exclusion. UNDP supports parliaments to assume their role in reviving the social contract in a way that reflects women's agency, builds trust in institutions and closes the gap between people – women and men – and the state.⁵

The Global Project on Parliaments as Partners Supporting Women, Peace and Security, funded by the Government of Norway, supports members of parliament, female and male, to use the full arsenal of tools at their disposal, most notably the collaboration with civil society and the media, to advance the implementation of the WPS agenda. During the pandemic, the project has supported parliaments and civil society to engender their countries' COVID-19 response and recovery. The examples and outcomes of this support are presented in this note.

Parliaments and WPS-aligned immediate response and medium-term recovery

Parliamentary scrutiny

Although social distancing rules have forced parliaments the world over to adapt their methods of working, parliaments must hold the emergency response to scrutiny. Women and women-led civil society must be reassured that even during crisis and with the lack of face-to-face interaction, a system of democratic control is in place to ensure that special measures are designed and funded in a way that meet their and their communities' needs, and will not push them into precarious legal, economic, and social conditions.

Parliament should consult and engage with activists, organizations and experts in the area of women's rights, WPS and human security, including within constituencies, to analyze the content and adequacy of response proposals, and specifically:

- Whether the gendered impacts of the implementation of emergency measures are being monitored and addressed, including their effect on the human rights and economic well-being of women; and whether such measures are rooted in conflict-sensitive gender analysis taking into account women's work, vision and local knowledge.

In Georgia, the Parliamentary Gender Equality Council is developing a gender analysis on the impact of the pandemic response on women and girls.

³ https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_COVID-19-womens-leadership-report_June-2020.pdf

⁴ See e.g. UNDP's regional platform on women's parliamentary representation in Europe and Central Asia, including future projections, at <https://equalfuture.eurasia.undp.org/>

⁵ <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/hiv-aids/beyond-recovery--towards-2030.html>

→ The level of inclusion of different groups of women, especially those at risk of being left behind, in response planning and crisis teams; deliberations and decisions of committees and task forces on the pandemic response.

In Singapore, during a parliamentary debate, MPs questioned the underrepresentation of women in the country's task force on the economic recovery from the impact of COVID-19, co-chaired by Minister for Social and Family Development. After the debate, an open letter has been published and signed by more representatives of 35 non-profit social enterprises, urging for more diverse representation of women, vulnerable segments of society, and climate-safe businesses in the task force.

→ Whether action against VAWG is an integral part of the immediate response; the extent to which VAWG survivors can access coordinated health, police and justice, and social services.

In Kyrgyzstan, the Forum of Women MPs, supported by UNDP, has proactively address and advocate GBV issues in the legislature. When the COVID-19 crises caused an abrupt 65% spike in reported GBV cases compared to the previous year. The MPs together with women's rights and gender equality community networks and movement have come together to call for an amendment to Code of Criminal Procedure on immediate detention of GBV abusers for the duration of up to 48 hours. The proposed amendment was signed by the President into law in June 2020. The implementation of the GBV legislation will be monitored by Gender Equality Council within Parliament, chaired by the champion of the project, Aida Kasymalieva MP.

→ Fitness for purpose of public health response, including recognition of the capacity, expertise, and need for protection of healthcare system and health workers; and protection of women's continuous access to healthcare, including sexual and reproductive health services

In Nepal, the Women and Social Committee of Federal Parliament, with UNDP's support, held expert consultations on the implications of COVID-19 response for those at risk of being left behind, including, among others, women, children and senior citizens. Provided with a more complete picture, the Committee issued a directive calling on the concerned ministries to guarantee access and continued provision of essential health services to such vulnerable groups, including in remote locations; to avoid deprioritisation of prenatal and maternal care; and to ensure that human rights guide the public health response. The Ministries of Health and Women have since pledged to address the Committee's concerns.

→ The degree to which social protection and economic relief measures reach women at risk of being left behind, including workers and entrepreneurs in the manufacturing sector, women in the informal sector, women with disabilities; and women-headed households.

In April 2020, the Argentine Congressional Budget Office published a detailed report on the impact of COVID-19 on the widening economic gender gap.⁶

→ Adequacy of policy solutions and measures for addressing the issues of unpaid care work during the immediate response and mid-term recovery plans (including through oversight of funds allocated to state-supported social care and childcare services and cash transfers for such care services; and of the fitness-for-purpose of strategies of continuity of care services).

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE PA) has published a report detailing the ways in which the gendered impacts of the pandemic, including on women's unpaid care work, as well as issues related to the women, peace and security agenda and women's political leadership.⁷ It calls for greater inter-parliamentary cooperation including via multilateral forums such as the OSCE PA to ensure that responses to the current crisis protect and advance gender equality.

⁶ Oficina de Presupuesto del Congreso, Efectos económicos de la crisis por COVID-19 sobre la desigualdad de género. Available at: <https://www.opc.gob.ar/informes/efectos-economicos-de-la-crisis-por-covid19-sobre-la-desigualdad-de-genero/>

⁷ OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Gender Balance Report 2020: the Gendered Impacts of COVID-19. Available at: <https://www.oscepa.org/documents/special-representatives/gender-issues/report-17/4055-2020-report-by-the-special-representative-on-gender-issues-the-gendered-impacts-of-covid-19/file>

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- Whether and to what extent women have continued access other essential services such as transportation or IT.
 - The impact of new technologies launched in response to COVID-19 for women and girls, from security implications of surveillance technologies to accessibility of digital forms of participation.
 - Adequacy and geographical reach of emergency response; whether the appropriate support reaches the local women who will benefit most from it.

In Sri Lanka, UNDP has supported a stronger engagement between local elected representatives, district Secretariats and civil society to set priorities for the support to women most vulnerable during COVID-19 response, including victims of SGBV. In Myanmar, UNDP is delivering capacity development to MPs through an online platform, helping them assess the gendered impacts of COVID-19, identify the needs of hard-to-reach groups, and develop community-based projects that will help improve socio-economic conditions of constituents.

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- The extent to which girls have continued learning opportunities during school closures; whether the impacts of school closures on girls are being addressed during recovery, including a strategy for bringing girls back to school.

In Sierra Leone, the Parliament has taken cue from the Ebola epidemic which exacerbated existing gender inequalities, including increased early childbearing and permanently dropping out of education. UNDP is supporting the Parliamentary Female Caucus in engaging local radio stations to sensitize constituents on COVID-19 and its gendered implications; state institutions and traditional leaders on security concerns and implications for women and girls; and borders authorities on the safety and security of women trading along border communities.

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- Where the military is being used to enforce containment measures, the gendered impacts of such deployment on civic life.

In Chile, a Roundtable on Gender and COVID-19 was convened by the Speaker of the Senate, the Chairwomen of the Gender and Labour Committees of the Chamber of Deputies together with 80 civil society organisations. The Roundtable engaged in a dialogue to agree on common proposals that together would form an Agenda on COVID-19 and Gender, including on employment and livelihoods, GBV, health, access to water, education, migration and territorial impact. The objective has set the tone for collaborative policy-making and women's leadership post-COVID-19.

Standing with women-led civil society.

Parliaments can use their power of scrutiny to ensure recognition and protection of civil society actors during the emergency response, and to remove barriers to their efforts to protect the health and wellbeing of communities by:

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- Ensuring that emergency measures include support to community-led first response and civil society service providers, for example, through earmarked funding or provision of PPE and safety guidelines.

In South Africa, relief funds have been earmarked for assisting NGO service providers.

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- Liaising with constituencies to provide facts and dispel misinformation about COVID-19, its effects, the government-led response and available support; raise awareness of the essential role of women and women's organizations in emergency response and resilience; address GBV, gendered stigma and hate speech; and identify support required.

In Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the inclusion of women-led civil society in information dissemination and strengthening sub-national human security response was key in the fight against Ebola.⁸

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- Scrutinizing and debating the implications for emergency measures for fundamental human rights which keep the civic space open, including impact on freedom of association and peaceful assembly, freedom of speech or freedom of movement. It is also the role of parliament to review the proportionality, legality and justifiability of any measures banning or restricting work activities and occupations, as well as new surveillance technologies.

In the UK, the parliamentary Human Rights Committee is holding an inquiry on the human rights implications of the Government's response to COVID-19, welcoming civil society submissions. Following a call from a community of grassroots activists, the Open Rights Group, the committee issued a report advising against a roll-out of a government contact-tracing app until it meets privacy and data protections standards.

International cooperation and support to the immediate global response

Facing a threat to global security, the world can only contain and recover from the effects of the pandemic if all countries respond effectively and on a coordinated basis, which makes international cooperation and support needed more than ever.

The international community is failing to forge a global ceasefire which would enable safe passage of medical, sanitary and food supplies into conflict-affected areas, missing out on the chance to contain violent conflict. The devastating economic impacts of the pandemic, compounded by long-term adverse trends in development assistance, threaten not only lives and livelihoods but also hard-won SDG gains. Further and sharper decline in the flow of foreign assistance to the poorest, most fragile and most conflict-affected countries can cripple opportunities for entire generations of women, youth, children and others at risk of being left behind. Given the looming threat of escalating social unrest globally, now more than ever, there is a need for parliamentary oversight and diplomacy to foster assistance, accountability and coordination between countries:

⁸ See, for example, WHO, 'Women are key in Ebola response'. Available at <https://www.who.int/news-room/facts-in-pictures/detail/women-join-hands-to-oust-ebola-from-drc>; NDI, 'Learning from Ebola: Civil society and COVID-19'. Available at: <https://www.ndi.org/our-stories/learning-ebola-civil-society-and-covid-19>; Colby Pacheco, 'Rethinking the Ebola response: How Liberians helped themselves'. Available at <https://www.devex.com/news/rethinking-the-ebola-response-how-liberians-helped-themselves-87030>.

→ Through budgetary oversight, parliaments in donor countries should ensure their governments maintain or increase the level of ODA (including that targeting gender equality as a principal objective in conflict and post conflict countries), earmark funds for urgent assistance and hold them to account for their fulfilling their international commitments under WPS Agenda. Assistance promoting implementation partnerships and re-granting schemes can help ensure that support reaches civil society organizations.

In his response to the Parliament, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands has pledged an additional EUR 350 million in ODA despite the decline in GNI as a consequence of the pandemic. The assistance would support achievement of the SDGs during COVID-19 recovery, and target those most vulnerable, including women and girls.

The Sint Maarten Recovery, Reconstruction and Resilience Trust Fund is a single-donor trust fund, financed by the Government of the Netherlands. It has supported the Civil Society Partnership Facility for Resilience project which aims to improve the capacity and resources of Sint Maarten's Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) working on reconstruction and resilience at the community level.

→ In recipient countries, parliaments should engage in consultations with the government and donors to ensure gender- and conflict-sensitive recovery assistance; and scrutinize such funds to maximize accountability, transparency and aid effectiveness. In all contexts, MPs should work closely with their countries' accountability institutions, including Supreme Audit Institutions and anti-corruption bodies, and civil society, to hold their governments accountable to taxpayers for the effectiveness and impact of such assistance on women and girls.

In Sierra Leone, the Parliament tabled the Auditor General's Report on the Management of Ebola Funds. An audit in Sierra Leone which found that 30% of funds for Ebola response had not been accounted for.

→ There is a role for parliaments to oversee the protection of migrant workers, refugees and displaced persons working in countries other than their own in COVID-19 response. This includes access to health services, social protection coverage and essential information, with particular attention to women migrant workers whose vulnerabilities in particular have been exacerbated during the pandemic. It is also important to probe whether the response effectively prevents migrants from lapsing into irregular status. Bilateral and regional cooperation that parliaments may influence can facilitate economic

In Nepal, UNDP's initiative N-Peace seeks to support the re-employment of women workers returning from India and Gulf countries. For example, in Nepal where migrants have returned from India and Gulf countries.

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