

COVID-19 AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS: BRIDGING RESPONSE GAPS AND DEMANDING A MORE JUST FUTURE



UN Women/Fahad Abdullah Kaber

Summary

This brief provides evidence of the different ways in which women's rights organizations have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the predicament that many of them face of increased relevance and demand at the same time as civic closure, restrictive work conditions and diminishing funding. By showcasing the critical roles these organizations are playing in the context of the pandemic as essential service providers, advocates and watchdogs, this brief also identifies a set of recommendations to strengthen them in the immediate term and pave the way for a more equal post-COVID future.

How is the world changing due to COVID-19?

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases has reached over 114 million as of 4 March 2021.¹ Women and girls are disproportionately affected by the multi-dimensional impacts of the pandemic, particularly those facing multiple intersecting forms of discrimination. The resilience of women's rights organizations is also being negatively impacted in ways that may have knock-on effects on the populations they serve and represent. The UN Secretary-General has warned that the effects of the pandemic risk causing a reversal of the limited progress made on women's rights and gender equality in the 26 years of implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.²

UN Women has synthesized the latest research and data on the gendered impacts of COVID-19 and formulated comprehensive recommendations for 'building back better' in the following complementary briefs:

- [Addressing the Economic Fallout of COVID-19: Pathways and Policy Options for a Gender-Responsive Recovery](#)
- [COVID-19 and the Care Economy: Immediate Action for Structural Transformation and a Gender-Responsive Recovery](#)
- [COVID-19 and Violence against Women: Addressing the Shadow Pandemic](#)
- [COVID-19 and Women's Leadership: From an Effective Response to Building Back Better](#)
- [COVID-19 and Conflict: Advancing Women's Meaningful Participation in Ceasefires and Peace Processes](#)
- [COVID-19 and Fiscal Policy: Using Gender-Responsive Budgeting in Support and Recovery](#)

Women's rights organizations are at the forefront of the COVID-19 response

Around the world, women's organizations have stepped up in response to the pandemic, providing frontline services and support to the marginalized, advocating for gender-responsive policy agendas and demanding government accountability for human rights. They are repurposing digital tools for advocacy and service delivery, staging urgent and creative public demonstrations and shifting priorities to meet emergent needs. Women's organizations are civil society groups whose membership and leadership are comprised primarily of women. Women's rights organizations are a sub-group of these, and

include groups, associations and movements led by women that also promote a women's rights agenda. They range from informal self-help groups or horizontal assemblies to formal national or international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and transnational networks, all of which can operate independently or in collaboration with the state.

This brief draws on UN consultations and rapid assessments of the impact of COVID-19 on women's rights organizations around the world, as well as academic and grey literature (see Box). What

Find out more

For further information on relevant UN rapid assessments—including those conducted by UN Women—of the immediate impacts of COVID-19 on civil society organizations (CSOs), with a focus on women's rights organizations, see:

UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women: "[Impact of COVID-19 on Violence against Women Through the Lens of Civil Society and Women's Rights Organizations](#)" (May 2020)

UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women: "[COVID-19 and the Impact on CSOs Working to End Violence against Women and Girls](#)." (October 2020)

Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF): "[Survey on COVID-19 Related Impacts & Needs: WPHF CSO Partners](#)."

UN Women Europe and Central Asia Regional Office: [Putting Women at the Forefront of the COVID-19 Response in Europe and Central Asia](#)

UN Women Asia and the Pacific Regional Office: [Rapid Assessment: Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Civil Society Organizations](#) (May 2020)

emerges is a picture of common trends, needs and challenges. While further in-depth research is needed to understand the specific impacts of COVID-19 on women’s rights organizations in different contexts, the evidence presented in this brief makes it clear that these organizations are at the forefront of this crisis.

Women’s rights organizations are filling gaps in essential services

As the pandemic strains public services and creates significant economic hardship, women’s rights organizations are stepping up to fill gaps in state service provision, often with little recognition and at significant cost. From providing food aid and personal protective equipment (PPE), to organizing collective childcare, disseminating reproductive health and hygiene kits, creating reporting mechanisms and providing psychosocial support for survivors of violence, and translating public service announcements into local languages, women-led NGOs, associations and mutual-aid groups around the world have pivoted to address the needs of women and their families at the community level. Under these conditions, women’s rights organizations are acting as de facto essential service providers, buffering inadequate state support and providing an informal safety net.

With limited resources, women’s rights organizations have revised, reprioritized and reoriented workplans, budgets and timelines. To sidestep ongoing restrictions around in-person work, they have rapidly shifted where possible to virtual service delivery. For example, hotlines, WhatsApp and email tools have enabled some women’s organizations to provide information to survivors of gender-based violence, and the use of mobile applications has enabled human rights defenders working in conflict-affected areas to receive real-time health and safety

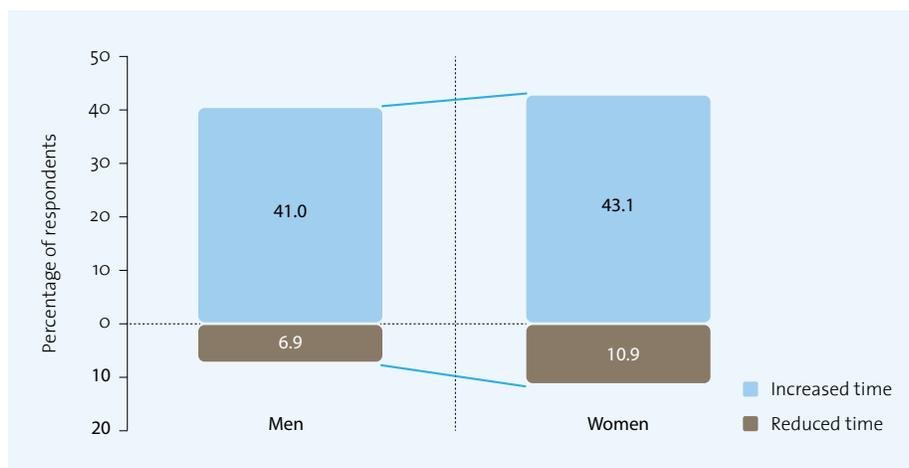
updates.³ In Malawi, for example, the Centre for Social Concern and Development switched to a combination of online and offline methods to share messages with girls and young women about gender-based violence during the pandemic, working in multiple languages through social media, podcasts, community radio and TV, and by distributing flyers.

Women’s rights organizations and grassroots movements with strong organizational capacity before the pandemic were able to scale up support swiftly during the crisis. In India, for example, the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) built on decades of community organizing by informal women workers to rapidly expand their work through established networks as crisis struck. In the absence of substantial state provision, SEWA provided ‘stay at home kits’ of dry rations and home essentials for daily wage earners, produced PPE for health-care workers and distributed fresh food for people experiencing homelessness, migrant families and those living in slums.⁴

Soup kitchens and care services are an integral part of the community response in many low-income settings. Members of the *Asamblea Feminista Conurbana Noreste* in Buenos Aires, for instance, are simultaneously delivering food and distributing information on sexual and reproductive health care, making their politics visible by painting the traditional soup kitchen stockpots violet: “the colour of the feminist movement”.⁵

Yet grassroots initiatives such as this one are heavily reliant on voluntary or poorly paid community work overwhelmingly done by women. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, women did three times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men, a tally that includes unpaid community care work.⁶ Emerging evidence shows that, in the context of lockdowns and closures

FIGURE 1:
Time dedicated to unpaid community work during the COVID-19 pandemic in Chile, by sex



Source: Ministry of Women and Gender Equality, Chile and UN Women 2020.

Notes: Survey conducted between 15 September and 4 October. Sample size = 1,527 individuals (736 men and 790 women).

of schools and care services, men are doing a little more of this work, but women continue to shoulder the vast majority of it.⁷ When it comes to voluntary community work, in Chile, for instance, before the pandemic, women did more than twice as much of this work than men.⁸ Since COVID-19 emerged, a slightly higher share of women than men report dedicating more time to community work, creating a triple shift of paid work, unpaid domestic work and community work, often leaving little or no time for self-care. These competing pressures on women's time may also explain why one in ten women have had to reduce their hours in this vital community work.

Women's time for paid and unpaid community work is not infinitely elastic. The compounding challenges of spiking demand and fragile state support can compromise the work of women's rights organizations and exacerbate their already precarious working conditions—at times, even threatening their organizational survival. As early as May 2020, a consultation involving 128 women's organizations and activists from 17 countries across Europe and Central Asia found widespread emotional burnout, fatigue and professional stress among gender-based violence crisis centre workers. This was linked to the pressure to create viable solutions for survivors in an unprecedented situation, while having to adapt to working from home or under restrictive lockdown measures amid balancing mounting family care responsibilities.⁹ Six months into the pandemic, these findings were echoed by an assessment of 144 civil society organisation (CSO) grantees of the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women, whose staff reported feeling “overwhelmed and burned out” by the high demand for services.¹⁰

Women's rights organizations are advocating for gender-just policy responses

Feminist advocacy in response to the COVID-19 crisis is more international and cross-border than during previous epidemics, such as those of Ebola and Zika, and aims to influence state responses in areas ranging from social protection and fiscal policies to sexual and reproductive health and rights.¹¹

At the national level, women's rights activists have used webinars, chat rooms, WhatsApp groups and collaborative online platforms to develop lobbying tools. These include feminist-led plans for COVID-19 response and recovery and gender budget assessments, which can be found in Austria, Chile, Canada and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) as well as in Hawai'i in the United States of America (USA). In Hawai'i, the State Commission on the Status of Women worked closely with women's community groups to create the ['Feminist Economic Recovery Plan'](#) through open online

meetings and participatory decision-making.¹² This included using Google Docs to draft ideas in real time, sharing visioning documents among all members of the coalition not only with leaders, and using closed-captioning software and language translators to increase accessibility. While the plan is not yet approved at the state level, it has been successfully passed in Maui County, the first area in the USA to approve a feminist economic recovery plan.¹³

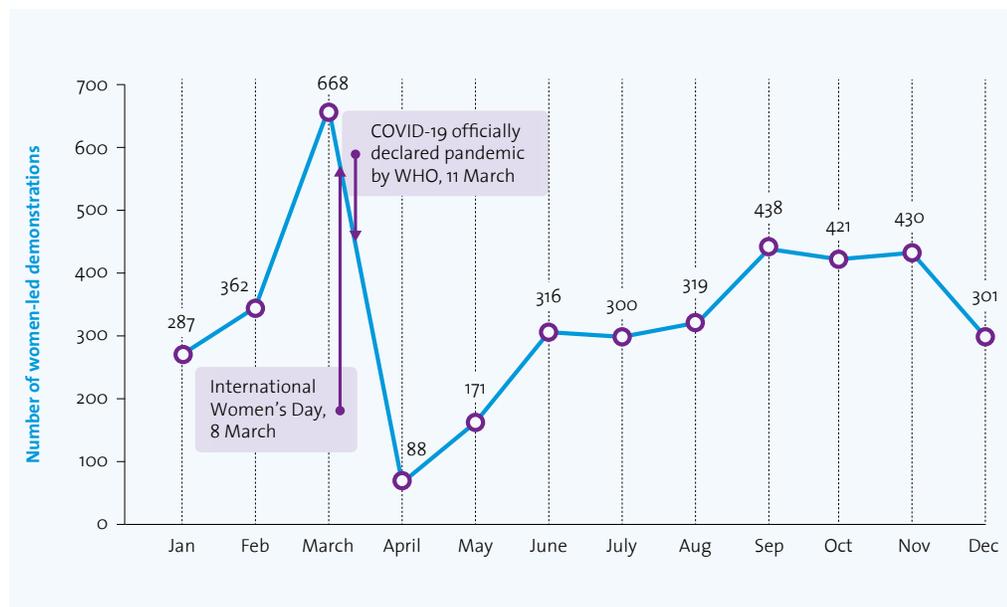
When a crisis occurs, the possibility of transformative action depends on the stock of alternative ideas being proposed. At the global level, transnational women's rights networks are seizing this opportunity to put forward feminist alternatives to current economic and social models through the use of online platforms and social media.¹⁴ In an array of campaigns and petitions taken up in public debates and by the media, these networks are putting the need for care of people and planet at the centre of demands for long-term recovery from COVID-19.¹⁵ The ['Call for a Feminist COVID-19 Policy'](#), published by the Feminist Alliance for Rights and endorsed by over 1,600 individuals and organizations from more than 100 countries and translated into six languages, is a notable example. The statement demands intersectional and rights-based responses to the pandemic, including improved access to health care, education, water, sanitation and food, and an end to social and economic inequality, violence against women and the abuse of power.¹⁶

While technology offers opportunities for both advocacy and service provision, not all women's rights organizations and the communities they serve can take advantage of these. In 2019, it was estimated that 327 million fewer women than men had access to a smartphone¹⁷ and, in relative terms, the global gender gap in Internet use was 17 percentage points.¹⁸ Within countries, women living in remote or rural communities often face multiple barriers to access and use of technology. Furthermore, gender-specific forms of harassment and violence often render online spaces unsafe for women and girls.¹⁹

Women's rights organizations are demanding accountability through protests and monitoring

As the pandemic has unfolded, bottom-up accountability mechanisms, such as social mobilizations, have been a key strategy of women's rights organizations to hold elected representatives to account. Figure 2 shows that women-led street demonstrations peaked in 2020 around International Women's Day on 8 March, but decreased rapidly after WHO officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March. But since June 2020, street demonstrations are again resurfacing around the world.

FIGURE 2:
Number of demonstrations led by women in January to December 2020, globally



Source: UN Women analysis based on ACLED 2020.

Notes: Data covering [192 countries and territories](#). Demonstrations led by women are defined as: those that are made up entirely of women, or have a majority of women participants; and demonstrations that are about women's rights issues. Events in which women demonstrated alongside men on issues not specifically related to women's rights are not included. As such, the data do not fully encapsulate women's involvement in social movements; that is a much larger set of information.

Since 11 March 2020, a total of 2,883 women-led protests have been recorded. In the face of lockdown measures and the risk of infection, these public gatherings illustrate the urgency of feminist demands.²⁰ From balcony protests to raise awareness of domestic violence in the State of Palestine, to calls for paid quarantine for domestic workers in Brazil, women's demands encompass the need to increase financing for care services and gender equality, stop austerity and cancel unjust debt and ensure radical action for climate, racial and gender justice.²¹

The urgent need to roll out emergency measures has, in some cases, prompted governments to by-pass parliamentary scrutiny. Accountability to and participation of civil society actors in these contexts, for example through citizen consultations

or participatory budgeting, have similarly been overlooked. Where women's rights advocates were largely side-lined in formal processes, organizations found other avenues to make their needs heard and act as human rights watchdogs.²² In the absence of official assessments in Colombia, for example, women local leaders rolled out informal censuses to evaluate community needs.²³ Meanwhile in Malawi, the appointment of a COVID-19 taskforce, comprising just 19 per cent women, prompted women's rights organizations to demand equal representation.²⁴ And in Tunisia, the Association of Democratic Women successfully lobbied the High Council of the Judicial System for court cases on violence against women to be treated as essential, which they achieved through meeting with judicial officials, sending open letters and publishing policy papers.²⁵

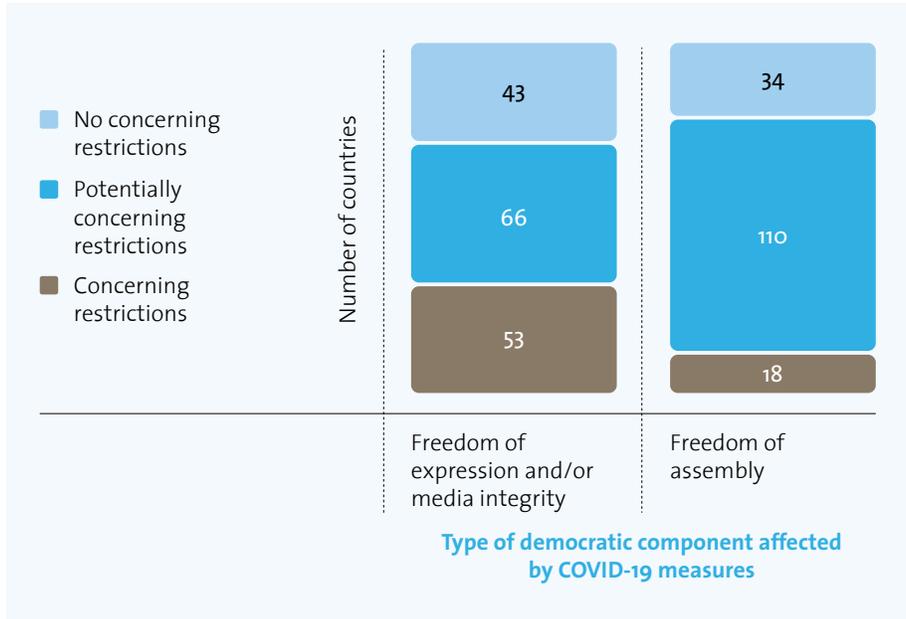
COVID-19 is compounding challenges for women's rights organizations

At the same time as women's rights organizations have been filling gaps in essential service provision and driving momentum for inclusive pandemic responses, COVID-19 has exacerbated and created new challenges for them. For many, it has meant operating in a situation characterized by poor working conditions, mobility restrictions that shrink civic spaces and diminishing funds at a time of increasing demand for their services. Without addressing these pressures, the long-term sustainability of women's rights organizations is at stake.

Lockdowns have closed civic spaces and been used to quell dissent

Although street and digital activism continue to take place across countries, according to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), by the end of November 2020, nearly two-thirds of countries in the world (61 per cent) had implemented measures to curb the pandemic that were concerning from a democracy and human rights perspective.²⁶ While some of these measures have been necessary and proportionate to mitigate COVID-19 health risks, they have

FIGURE 3:
Number of countries with COVID-19 related restrictions on freedom of assembly and expression



Source: UN Women analysis based on available data on concerning restrictions on freedom of assembly and expression and media integrity for a sample of 162 countries from International IDEA 2020a (as of 28th October 2020, 9th update). IDEA defines “concerning restrictions” as COVID-19 related measures or developments that violate human rights or democratic benchmarks because they are disproportionate, unnecessary, illegal or indefinite. “Potentially concerning restrictions” are COVID-19 related measures or developments that may lead to a violation of human rights or democratic benchmarks and be considered disproportionate, unnecessary, illegal or indefinite if enforced or maintained over time.

also curtailed opportunities and space for democratic protest and accountability. UN Women analysis of the IDEA dataset found there has been a reduction of autonomous civic spaces, defined as spaces where activists can freely express opinions, access information and assemble to influence policy-making in at least 18 countries between February and October 2020, limiting the ability of women’s rights organizations to operate, including in support of the COVID-19 response.²⁷

Furthermore, the UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has expressed concern that in some contexts, governments may be using the pandemic opportunistically to silence human rights activists and quell opposition, through enacting national emergency powers and using information and communications technologies (ICTs) for citizen surveillance.²⁸ In October 2020, 53 out of 162 countries had implemented “concerning restrictions” on freedom of expression and/or the integrity of the media, framed as a way to combat disinformation circulating about the virus, but with broader ramifications for democracy and human rights. Activists have also raised the alarm about the misuse of COVID-19 response measures to curtail feminist protests, including where restrictions to freedom of assembly prevent feminists from demonstrating against attempts to roll-back women’s rights gains, such as in Honduras, Hungary and Poland.²⁹ For activists and women’s human rights defenders working in especially hostile circumstances, the pandemic restrictions have disrupted

their ability to create safety plans and risk assessments, and lockdowns have made it easier for armed actors to locate and harm women social leaders with impunity.³⁰

Funding shortages and changing donor priorities put organizations under significant strain

Real—and expected—funding shortfalls further strain overstretched and under-resourced women’s rights organizations. Prior to COVID-19, only 8 per cent of gender-related aid dedicated to civil society went directly to organizations in developing countries, of which little was reported to benefit women’s rights organizations.³¹ Where funding does reach them, it is usually indirectly channelled through international NGOs or development agencies, and frequently employs restrictive or short-term funding modalities that many small- and medium-sized organizations cannot access.³² Evidence from the 2008 financial crisis reinforces a bleak forecast of potential economic losses for NGOs at a time of increased demand for women’s rights organizations.³³

The economic downturn caused by COVID-19 has diverted national and international civil society funds towards emergency pandemic responses and state capacity building.³⁴ Civil society organizations dependent on member contributions have seen a sudden drop in budgets, while the cancellation of fundraising activities may deepen their future financial deficits. Such funding cutbacks hinder the ability of women’s rights organizations to deliver

needed services and to engage in advocacy and policy work, especially if this is perceived as unrelated to the pandemic and given a backseat.³⁵ For example, a regional report on African CSOs found that, as of April 2020, 56 per cent of the 1,015 organizations surveyed across 44 countries had already experienced funding cuts, while 66 per cent expected to lose funding in the next three to six months.³⁶ Fifty per cent of the CSOs consulted in the above-mentioned report had cut expenses in response to funding loss or uncertainty, and 69 per cent had already reduced or cancelled their operations.³⁷ Across the Middle East, activists report that funding cuts and donor inflexibility have caused “a massive shrinking of implemented activities on the ground” with respect to human rights and democracy.³⁸

In conflict-affected and humanitarian settings, UN Women’s rapid assessment revealed that nearly one third of organizations consulted (22 out of 75) were at risk of closure due to the pandemic and its effects.³⁹ Even in the relatively early days of the pandemic, UN Women found that by April almost three quarters (71 per cent) of the 100 women’s CSOs surveyed in the Asia Pacific region were somewhat or very negatively affected, with 12 per cent having to temporarily suspend all activities (see Figure 4).⁴⁰

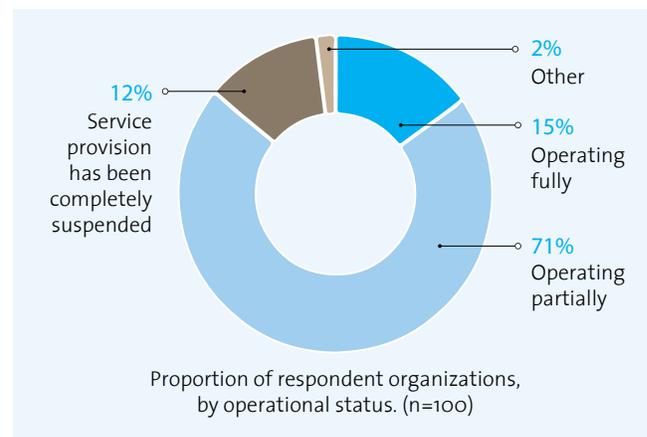
Poor working conditions in the not-for-profit sector have been compounded by COVID-19

Available data suggest that not-for-profit organizations typically employ a largely feminized labour force that often works under precarious conditions, including high levels of job insecurity and low wages; work overload and expectations to work overtime; and an over-reliance on workers in temporary and part-time contracts with no social benefits (or even volunteers) to perform core functions.⁴¹ One estimate based on data spanning 42 countries worldwide suggests that volunteers account for 42 per cent of non-profit workers.⁴²

With the onset of the pandemic, such working conditions have worsened in many contexts, with negative ripple effects for

organizations, workers and beneficiaries. Across Africa, for example, half of the 1,015 CSOs surveyed had already introduced cost-cutting measures such as furloughing staff, hiring freezes, reducing salaries and working hours and increasing reliance on volunteers.⁴³ In Europe and Central Asia, a significant share of women’s organizations and activists reported that their staff were working from home under challenging conditions, including lack of Internet access or work equipment.⁴⁴ They also reported PPE shortages and unrealistic safety guidelines difficult to implement in the challenging working conditions they face, with women providing basic health and food delivery in their communities being exposed to added health risks due to lack of face masks, gloves and hygienic equipment.⁴⁵ Local women-led and women’s rights organizations across a range of countries in the Global South report being the last to access PPE, sometimes experiencing months of delays in receiving supplies promised to them by international agencies.⁴⁶

FIGURE 4:
Impact of COVID-19 on the operational continuity of women’s civil society organizations in Asia and the Pacific (April 2020)



Source: UN Women 2020a.

Pathways to strengthen women’s rights organizations in the COVID-19 response and recovery

All stakeholders, including donors and governments, can support women’s rights organizations to adapt to the new realities presented by the pandemic and amplify their advocacy for more caring and just societies. This brief proposes a set of recommendations aimed at the recognition and participation of and support for women’s rights organizations in the immediate COVID-19 response, ensuring long-term sustainability of their work and safe and enabling civic space.

Ensure the meaningful participation of women’s rights organizations in COVID-19 decision-making

Because women’s rights organizations serve as knowledge brokers within their communities, their direct and meaningful participation in the design, implementation and monitoring of COVID-19 responses is key to ensuring policies are effective, inclusive and grounded in the realities of women and girls.⁴⁷

Measures to involve women's rights organizations in the COVID-19 response include establishing formal consultative mechanisms at the national or local level; participatory needs assessments; involving them in decisions regarding vulnerable groups; or engaging them in peacemaking processes.⁴⁸ In Sierra Leone, for example, a government-led platform was established to enable civil society to directly influence decision-making in the COVID-19 emergency response.⁴⁹ In Nepal, a multi-stakeholder network was established to monitor human rights during the pandemic. Its first report drew attention to the additional problems women faced in pregnancy and childbirth and the alarming rise in maternal mortality during lockdown due to challenges accessing emergency health services.⁵⁰

In order to take full advantage of the opportunities presented by digital participation in COVID-19 responses, measures must be taken to address barriers such as lack of Internet access, computer equipment and limited language translations as well as online violence and harassment.⁵¹ Technology must also be adapted to the different needs of specific groups such as women and girls with disabilities.

Recognize women's rights organizations as essential service providers and promote safe working conditions

The unwavering response by women's rights organizations requires an equally widespread public recognition of their vital role. The formal recognition of CSOs as essential service providers can contribute to ensuring the sustainability of their often life-saving services by facilitating their access to government subsidies and decision-making processes. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Women [COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker](#), 48 out of 135 countries have treated services that prevent and respond to violence against women and girls as essential, meaning that workers can continue to provide support and shelter for survivors, may be exempt from mobility restrictions and eligible for emergency funding. However,

The safety of those delivering essential services through women's rights organizations must also be guaranteed through provision of PPE and guidance for workers.⁵⁶ In the State of Palestine, for example, some women's rights organizations are offering staff peer support as part of an overall approach to psychological health and safety in the workplace.⁵⁷ A holistic strategy created by the Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights directly supports feminists through access to digital technology, information on health and safety, collective care and psychosocial support, and funding to meet the basic needs of activists and their families.⁵⁸

State recognition of women's rights organizations should also be coupled with investments in infrastructure and public services in the communities they serve.⁵⁹ Access to water and sanitation, for instance, can improve the working conditions under which women's rights organizations operate and minimize workers' and beneficiaries' exposure to health risks. Strengthening the evidence base around the work and impact of women's rights organizations is also key to making their contributions visible beyond the confines of their communities.

Sustain and increase funding to support women's rights organizations

Donors should exercise flexibility in order to enable women's rights organizations to pivot to meet unexpected challenges during the pandemic response and recovery. Governments in Germany, Malawi and Mexico, for example, have changed administrative procedures such as in procurement, spending, grant making and contracting to facilitate this.⁶⁰ In Zimbabwe, regulations instruct banks and landlords to exercise flexibility on the payment of mortgages and rents for organizations.⁶¹ In Argentina, Australia, France and the Netherlands, COVID-19 recovery measures for civil society include wage subsidies and credit access schemes.⁶²

Donors should also support the core operating costs of organiza-

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