

COVID-19 AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP: FROM AN EFFECTIVE RESPONSE TO BUILDING BACK BETTER



Summary

This brief shines a light on the critical role of women's leadership in responding to COVID-19 and preparing for a more equitable recovery. Across the globe, women are at the helm of institutions carrying out effective and inclusive COVID-19 responses, from the highest levels of decision-making to frontline service delivery. At the same time, the brief recognizes pre-existing and new constraints to women's participation and leadership and advocates for measures to facilitate women's influence over decision-making processes. It makes recommendations to be considered by national, regional and international policy makers. In addition to analyzing the pandemic's immediate impacts on women's political participation, the brief demonstrates the opportunity to 'build back better' by including and supporting women, and the organizations and networks that represent them, in the decision-making processes that will ultimately shape the post-pandemic future.

How is the world changing due to COVID-19?

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases reached over 9.4 million as of 26 June 2020.¹ The pandemic is straining health and care systems, widening socio-economic divides and creating deep political and social insecurity. These dynamics challenge the equitable and effective distribution of health and social care, restrict mobility, deepen inequalities and shift the priorities of public and private institutions, including in the allocation of funding. Women and girls are disproportionately affected, particularly those who face multiple inequalities due to income, race, geographic location, age, disability, migration and health status. Feminist leadership and the wide-reaching participation of women’s rights organizations are essential to ensure that the needs of women and other marginalized groups are prioritized in the immediate response, as well as in recovery and resilience measures.

UN Women has synthesized the latest research and data on COVID-19’s gender impacts, and formulated comprehensive

recommendations for ‘building back better’ in the following complementary briefs:

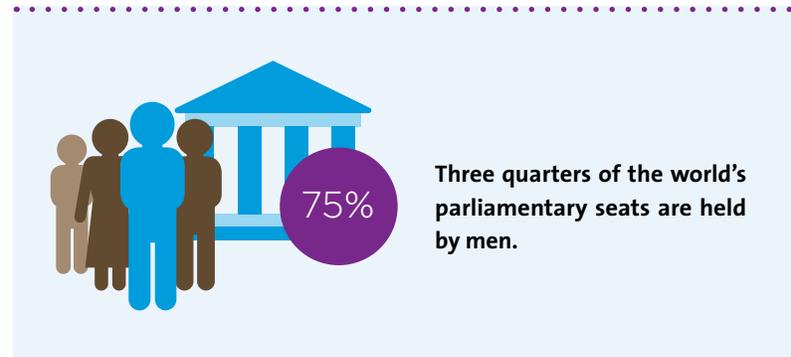
- [Addressing the Economic Fallout of COVID-19: Pathways and Policy Options for a Gender-Responsive Recovery](#)
- [COVID-19 and the Care Economy: Immediate Action for Structural Transformation and a Gender-Responsive Recovery](#)
- [COVID-19 and Violence against Women: Addressing the Shadow Pandemic](#)
- [An Urgent COVID-19 Response: Women’s Meaningful Participation in Ceasefires and Peace Processes](#)

COVID-19 is affecting political institutions, processes and policies

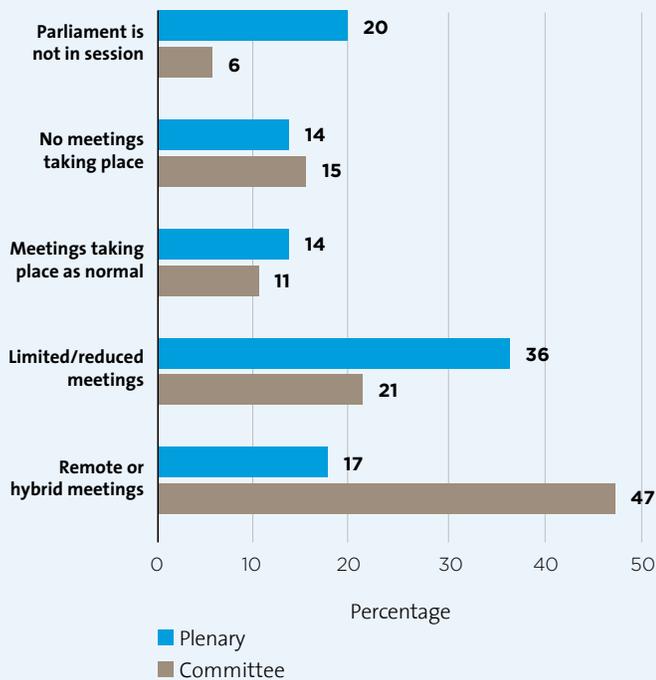
This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#) (1995), the visionary global agenda for achieving women’s equal participation in all areas of life. Indeed, over the past quarter century, women’s influence over many facets of public life has increased significantly. Women are entering politics in greater numbers than ever before, and their influence over high-level decision-making has been growing. Women’s full and equal participation has also been recognized as essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As women bring different experiences and perspectives, talents, and skills to the table, their contribution to better-informed decisions, more just outcomes, and policies and laws that work for both women and men is increasingly accepted. In many countries where inequality has been reduced, strong national mechanisms for gender equality and feminist movements have played critical roles in advancing inclusive and equitable laws and policies, as well as ensuring that the needs of the most marginalized are met. Women’s organizations and feminist activists have been leading many of the protests for civic and political rights held across the world in 2019-2020.²

Throughout the world, however, women remain significantly under-represented in many aspects of decision-making. Men continue to be dominant in politics, for example, holding three quarters of the world’s parliamentary seats.³ Attacks on women in public life are also increasing.⁴

With the spread of the novel coronavirus, the context for women’s participation and leadership in public life is shifting further still. While initial data shows that more men than women are dying from COVID-19, researchers warn that the data are often incomplete and health workers who are predominantly women face significant risks.⁵ Across the world women are confronting increases in domestic violence, care duties, unemployment and poverty (see the UN Women briefs mentioned above). These impacts exacerbate existing socio-economic inequalities and underscore the need for gender-responsive policies, laws and budgets. They also make clear that women’s participation in the response and recovery plans is vital to ensure their needs are met.⁶ Their participation and influence are needed in the design, implementation and monitoring of COVID-19-related laws, policies and budgets at all levels of decision-making: local, national, regional and international.⁷



Parliamentary operations during COVID-19



Source:
Inter-Parliamentary Union, part of its campaign 'Parliaments in a time of pandemic'. Center for Innovation in Parliament.

Notes: Based on a sample of 66 parliaments as of 4 June 2020.

Alongside the devastating health, social and economic effects of COVID-19, the pandemic is having far-reaching impacts on political processes, institutions and policies. Extensive lockdowns, adopted to slow transmission of the virus, are restricting freedom of movement and, in the process, freedom to enjoy many other human rights.⁸ The pandemic is effecting access to political rights, for example out of 66 countries surveyed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, 20 percent had suspended their parliaments in June 2020.⁹ As of the end of May, 64 countries and territories around the world had postponed or cancelled national and subnational elections.¹⁰

At the same time, across the world women are on the frontlines of the COVID-19 response, as Heads of State and Government, health-care workers, carers at home and community leaders and mobilizers, among other roles. Women leaders in several countries are excelling in the response, providing powerful examples of how women's leadership and participation can bring more effective, inclusive and fair policies, plans and budgets to address the pandemic. For women to be able to lead and participate fully in helping build back better, it is important to recognize what women leaders are doing, to ensure balanced representation in decision-making bodies, inclusion of their expertise and funding for gender-responsive interventions.¹¹

Women are leading effective responses even as they remain under-represented in decision-making forums

In several countries around the globe, women are at the helm of effective and inclusive COVID-19 response efforts, though they are frequently under-represented at the highest levels of decision-making in sectors that are directly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Women are leading the way

Women are Heads of State and Government in only 21 countries worldwide,¹² but their leadership has been lauded for its greater effectiveness in managing the COVID-19 health crisis.¹³ Women Heads of Government in Denmark, Ethiopia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, New Zealand and Slovakia are being recognized for the rapidity of the response they are leading, which has not only included measures to 'flatten the curve'—such as confinement measures, social distancing and widespread testing—but also the transparent and compassionate communication of

fact-based public health information.¹⁴ In countries such as Canada, Ethiopia, India and Madagascar, women medical and health experts are increasingly found in leadership positions and taking the lead in daily press briefings and public service announcements.¹⁵ Women mayors across the world, from Banjul (the Gambia) to Barcelona (Spain), have been highly visible in responding to the pandemic and are sharing their experiences in online forums.¹⁶

The leadership styles of women leaders in the COVID-19 response have been described as more collective than individual, more collaborative than competitive and more coaching than commanding.¹⁷ It is noteworthy that in 2019—prior to the pandemic—nearly half of the world's population (47 per cent) believed that men made better political leaders than women.¹⁸ Today, lower COVID-19 death rates and effective virus

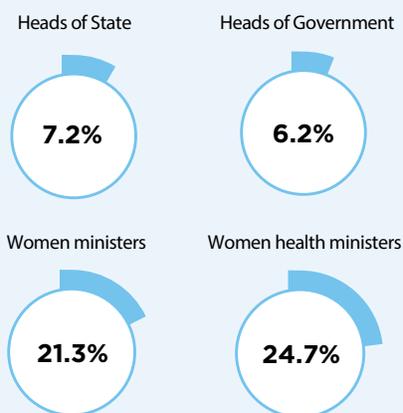
containment policies in countries led by women are disproving the discriminatory social norms driving these beliefs.¹⁹

In many countries lack of women's representation undercuts an inclusive response

In far too many areas of public life, women remain woefully under-represented in decision-making institutions. Women make up only a quarter (24.9 per cent) of members of national parliaments worldwide²⁰ and 36.3 per cent of elected officials in local deliberative bodies.²¹ Globally, as of 1 January 2020, only 21.3 per cent of ministers are women. In only 30 cabinets worldwide women make up at least 40 per cent of ministers.²² Women's under-representation as health ministers is especially concerning: while women make up 70 per cent of health sector workers,²³ only 24.7 per cent of the world's health ministers are women,²⁴ and they hold just 25 per cent of senior roles in health institutions.²⁵ Meanwhile, 72 per cent of executives of global health organizations are men.²⁶ Women's representation in the media is also lacking: Available evidence suggests that only one woman for every three men is quoted in the media speaking about the pandemic.²⁷

Women's participation is also needed in emergency response groups and task teams and in operation centres. But these teams tend to predominantly recruit from police, fire and transport services—where few women are in leadership positions—and typically include few women experts from health, education, social affairs or national gender equality mechanisms.

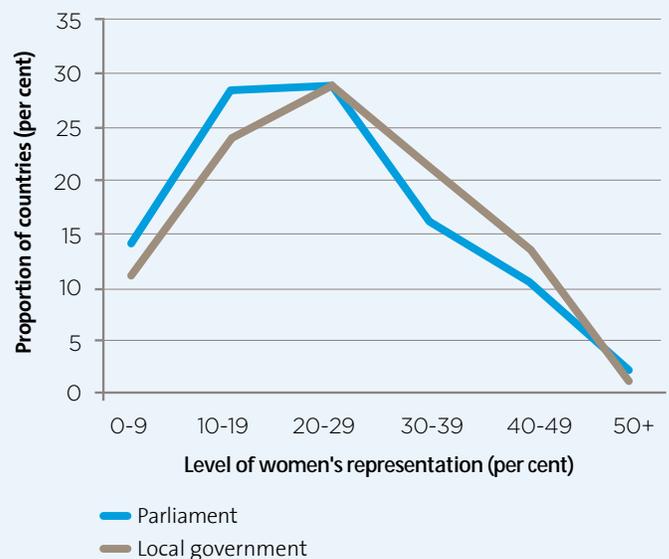
Women are under-represented in decision-making at all levels



Source:
UN Women calculations based on IPU-UN Women 2020.

Women's unequal representation puts their specific needs at risk of being overlooked in the development, scrutiny and monitoring of COVID-19 policies, plans and budgets, including for economic recovery and future health resilience. For example, as governments revise budgets to divert resources to the COVID-19 response, there is a real danger that already limited support to women-run small businesses and to services that women rely on, such as pre- and post-natal care and sexual and reproductive health services, will be cut.

Distribution of countries by level of women's representation in national and local legislative bodies



Source:
UN Women calculations based on data from 1 January 2020.
Data on parliaments are from IPU (2020a).

New burdens risk further hindering women's participation

During the pandemic, many women are shouldering additional domestic and care work at home and are facing threats related to the virus and its effects, which may negatively impact their ability to participate fully in public life. Measures should be taken to address these burdens, including through the provision of protective equipment for women who work in their communities, access to information and funding and changes in working practices. For example, if parliaments are deciding on new procedures to deliberate and take decisions during the pandemic, they should take into account the needs of women legislators and staff, who may have more care duties at home but should still be involved in passing emergency laws, allocating resources and scrutinizing government spending.²⁸

Gender equality should also be considered when electoral operations are being adapted to the pandemic context, to respond to public health concerns, including for voter registration, candidate nomination, voter education, electoral campaigning and voting. Governments and their electoral management bodies need to ensure that women can participate equally in elections, whether voting is in person or through remote means. Particular attention is needed to ensure that women facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination—especially rural women, indigenous women and those with disabilities—are not disenfranchised or faced with undue family influence on voting preferences.

With many of the traditional spaces of public engagement and debate unavailable, social media and the Internet are growing in importance as forums for information, consultation and deliberation. Some political candidates, for example, are holding virtual conferences, briefings, campaign events and town halls. In many parts of the world, women are less likely than men to have access to a phone or computer (the ‘digital gender divide’), which risks negatively affecting their access to public information and expression.²⁹ In these contexts, the printed press, radio and television, the post, and public gatherings that meet relevant health and safety guidelines are also being employed to provide information on political issues as well as to help prevent the transmission of COVID-19. For virtual democratic processes to be truly inclusive, special efforts are needed to address the escalating rates of cyberviolence against women and other marginalized groups,³⁰ including online attacks against women politicians and activists.

Community-based organizations are leading in the frontline response

Evidence from the Ebola and Zika epidemics illustrates the critical role of community-based organizations (CBOs) and

women’s organizations in reaching marginalized populations, such as women living with disabilities, women living with HIV, migrant and refugee women, and others. The current pandemic reinforces their essential role in frontline crisis response. CBOs and women’s organizations are drawing on their technical expertise and access to local communities and disenfranchised groups to fill gaps in essential services, procure or produce health supplies such as masks and sanitizer and provide vital information about the changing public health landscape. Women’s organizations in Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, Nigeria, Sudan and Uganda, for example, are using social media to share information about how to prevent the spread of the virus and are reaching out directly to women and girls when the communities they serve do not have access to the Internet. They are also raising awareness about the specific concerns of women and other marginalized groups during the pandemic, including increased exposure to gender-based violence and loss of income due to the closure of informal markets.³¹ Women’s organizations in India, Kyrgyzstan, Rwanda and Serbia, amongst other countries, have scaled up their work on violence against women by providing immediate and free legal and psychosocial support to victims of violence on 24-hour hotlines and online chat channels.

Even though women’s organizations and community groups shoulder much of the response efforts in local communities, all too often they are excluded from crisis response planning. In 2018, for example, local women’s organizations were only consulted in a little over half (56 per cent) of humanitarian response plan development processes.³² In the current COVID-19 crisis, many women’s organizations report that they are under threat of closure due to funding constraints and changing donor priorities.³³

Pathways to strengthen women’s leadership and participation in the COVID-19 response and recovery

The many existing examples of women who are leading effective and inclusive responses to the pandemic should encourage governments, elected officials and UN agencies to propel more women into decision-making processes and support more gender-balanced institutions. While governments have the most visible role in facilitating women’s equal representation and participation in decision-making, parliamentarians and local elected officials—as well as UN agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector—all have a role to play.

1. Ensure that decision-making bodies are gender-balanced.

Governments at all levels should strive for gender balance

in all institutions responsible for COVID-19 response and recovery as well as in preparedness for future health crises.³⁴ They should conduct oversight of the gender composition of appointed task forces, crisis management commissions and other relevant COVID-19 response teams. They should also ensure that decision-making bodies involved in the COVID-19 response include gender experts.

Governments can be held accountable to commitments to gender balance in governmental bodies and committees (as made in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action) by making information on women’s representation in COVID-19 decision-making publicly available.³⁵ Where balance does

not exist, temporary special measures such as gender quotas should be put in place.

- 2. Harness existing gender equality institutions and mechanisms in the pandemic response.** Today at least 192 countries have dedicated gender equality mechanisms or focal points, although their influence and effectiveness varies across national contexts.³⁶ During the pandemic, as in less tumultuous times, the involvement of such mechanisms is critical to ensure that national planning, decision-making, policy formulation and implementation, and budgeting processes contribute to achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. For example, the Minister of Equality in Spain put in place a plan known as ‘Mascarilla 19’ (Mask 19) to facilitate reporting of gender-based violence incidents during the pandemic.³⁷ The gender equality ministries in several countries in Africa report that they are substantially involved in COVID-19 response efforts, including in the development of guidelines for gender responsiveness, and in advocacy with other members of cabinet for programming to support women entrepreneurs and survivors of domestic violence.³⁸ In Costa Rica, the Vice President formed a Women’s Council to propose and advise on the COVID-19 response.³⁹ Governments should continue or expand the involvement of gender equality mechanisms in prevention, response and recovery, including by providing the institutions with needed human and financial resources.
- 3. Ensure that gender equality concerns are embedded in the design and implementation of national COVID-19 policy responses and budgets.** Governments and legislatures need to ensure policies and budgets enacted in response to COVID-19 are informed by sex-disaggregated data, include the results of gender impact assessments and analysis and have measures to track the COVID-19 response’s impact on women and girls. For example, Canada and Spain both deployed pre-existing gender analysis systems in their COVID-19 response efforts, which helped them design measures to promote gender equality and ensure access to critical services for women from the outset. The analysis showed existing funding gaps for Canada’s women’s shelters and assistance centres, which the Government quickly addressed by providing up to Can\$50 million to boost their capacity to assist or prevent cases of domestic violence during the pandemic.⁴⁰ Where this is not yet happening, parliamentarians should have opportunities to ask questions about the gender impacts of proposed COVID-19 policies and budget reallocations and/or cuts.

United Nations and development agencies should also meet their commitments to funding gender equality by rigorously

applying a gender marker within COVID-19 pooled funding mechanisms and assigning ambitious targets.

- 4. Recognize and remove barriers to women’s political participation.** Pre-existing inequalities and discriminatory social norms need to be considered when developing new modes of participation and decision-making.⁴¹ For example, governments should weigh the impact that emergency measures will have on women’s exercise of their political rights, including in legislatures, public consultations, and elections during COVID-19.⁴² They may need to initiate flexible working arrangements and other measures to ensure that women are not excluded from key governance processes on account of the extra care and domestic work responsibilities. In Bogota, Colombia, and Barcelona, Spain, women mayors are promoting values of solidarity and empathy in their cities and encouraging social norms change to build more inclusive post-COVID-19 societies.⁴³
- 5. Improve access to public information for women and their organizations.** With many of the traditional spaces of public engagement and debate unavailable, social media and the Internet are growing in importance as forums for information, consultation and deliberation. Information needs to be disseminated in a variety of languages despite the online dominance of English. Social media platforms must take action to discourage and prevent online harassment in virtual forums. Telecommunications companies and Internet service providers should help expand access to affordable connectivity.⁴⁴

In some countries and regions, the Internet will remain inaccessible and other forms of information exchange, such as TV, radio and public announcements, must continue or be expanded for women audiences. In Mali, for example, TV and radio spots initially designed to encourage women’s engagement in elections were modified to include messaging on how to prevent transmission of the virus. Governments and their partners can organize smaller in-person meetings where social distancing is adhered to for women to obtain information and voice their needs and priorities. Civil society and women’s CBOs can help promote women’s access to information, particularly in rural areas and with groups that tend to be left behind such as indigenous and minority women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI) persons and persons with disabilities.
- 6. Include and support women and women’s organizations in COVID-19 response decision-making.** Governments and donors should consult with women’s organizations when carrying out assessments, and developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating programmes and policies. Governments should

facilitate the engagement by all institutions responsible for COVID-19 response at national and local levels with women activists and representatives of women's organizations. Additional efforts should be made to ensure that there are safe spaces for women, especially for those facing multiple forms of discrimination, to voice their needs, priorities and concerns regarding personal safety and security, health, economic recovery, care burdens and other gendered consequences and risk factors of the pandemic. Governments should provide women's networks and CBOs with up-to-date information on the virus and the response and, if they require it, training and resources to act in emergencies.

Donors and governments relying on the access and knowledge of women's organizations and other CBOs should also equip them with sufficient support to carry out their work. They should ensure dedicated and flexible funding to women's organizations for core costs, to purchase personal protective equipment, to continue their regular initiatives, and to carry out COVID-19 response and recovery. In line with the UN Secretary General's call, UN agencies and Member States should expand and use existing funds for gender equality and women's organizations—for example, UN Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund and the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women.⁴⁵

UN Women's partnerships in action

UN Women is uniquely positioned to offer technical assistance and capacity building, knowledge products and coordination with UN partners to strengthen the gender responsiveness of institutions' COVID-19 policies, plans and budgets. It is supporting women's leadership and participation in response and recovery in a number of countries.

Advocating for COVID-19 response and recovery efforts that promote gender equality

UN Women is collaborating with regional organizations to advocate for more gender-sensitive responses that address women's urgent needs and ensure women influence decision-making processes. Through this work, it is also increasing the visibility and recognition of women leaders' contributions.

On 13 April 2020, the Latin American and Caribbean Parliament (PARLATINO), headquartered in Panama, issued a [Declaration](#) endorsing the recommendations of a [UN Women report on COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean](#) on how to incorporate women and gender equality in the management of the crisis response. In May, the African Union (AU) published

to discuss their strategies, concerns and experiences of leading in the pandemic, highlighting the critical roles of women at the front lines of the crisis. The participating leaders issued a joint Call for Action to urge local, regional, national and international institutions to take decisive steps to protect and empower women and girls everywhere.⁴⁶

UN Women is also showcasing women leaders' contributions to the COVID-19 prevention and response measures and inspiring further gender-responsive measures. For example, it is tracking and publishing statements by women Heads of State and Government through global media monitoring. In line with recommendations from the Committee on Eliminating Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee) on the equal participation of women in decision-making, UN Women also continues to promote the use of temporary special measures such as gender quotas and commitments to gender balance in planning and decision-making on the COVID-19 response as well as in national health leadership.

Creating safe spaces for women leaders on- and offline

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