

A Primer for Parliamentary Action

GENDER SENSITIVE RESPONSES TO COVID-19

This Primer highlights practical ways Members of Parliament (MPs) and parliamentary staff can take action to ensure COVID-19 response and recovery decision-making address women's needs. It is informed by the differential impacts of the disease on women as documented to date, and the common needs and challenges expressed by MPs and parliamentary staff adapting to new priorities and ways of working around the world.

A **Checklist** is included to guide MPs and parliamentary staff on gender sensitive options for COVID-19 response and recovery both during and beyond the pandemic.

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**COVID-19
RESPONSE**



INTRODUCTION

Parliaments have a responsibility to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic with gender sensitivity. This is vital for public order and the rule of law, the effective containment of the disease, and the health and wider well-being of the public, both now, and in the future.

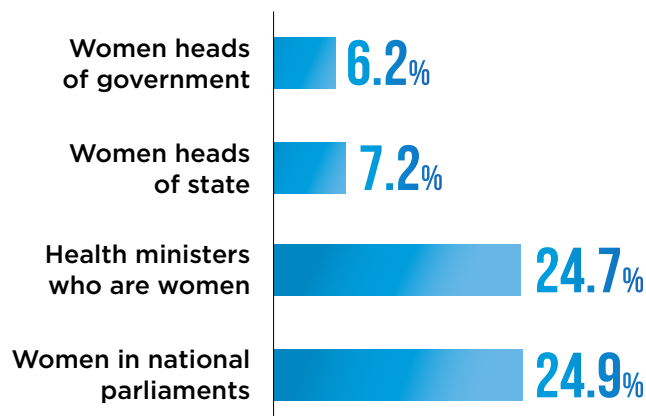
Every public office holder has an obligation to serve the women they represent by addressing gender equality as part of their work; in a pandemic, this obligation is even more important. Response and recovery policies and budgets that benefit from women's contributions will lead to better informed decisions, more just outcomes, and greater resilience against health emergencies like COVID-19. The role of parliaments in legislating and scrutinizing governments' policies and budgets during the crisis is key to curtailing deepening gender inequality.

Times of crisis, however, can lead to decisions being taken in haste, without consideration of women's rights, experiences and perspectives, especially as these are often omitted in decision-making in 'normal' times.

Women make up 70 per cent of health and social sector workers,¹ but are only 25 per cent of national legislators.² Whereas men are universally represented in decision-making bodies around COVID-19 response, women are systematically underrepresented among political, health and economic decision-makers. At best, this perpetuates the false perception that men are better crisis managers. At worst, health crisis budget and policy responses that exclude women from consultation or decision-making - or that don't consider gender at all - are not only less effective but can cause harm.³

“Just think about it: globally, women make up 70 per cent of workers in the health and social sector, and they do three times as much unpaid care work at home as men. Yet, they are systematically excluded from the decision-making bodies that initiate life-saving emergency protocols in health-care settings.”

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director,
UN Women



Source: Map of Women in Politics, IPU & UN Women (2020)

OPPORTUNITIES OF GENDER SENSITIVE PARLIAMENTARY ACTION IN CRISIS TIMES

1. Gender equality is a matter of human rights and democratic principles - including political equality, public participation, transparency, public service, deliberation, and fair and just decision-making - which the public counts on parliaments to embody and promote, in a crisis.
2. Parliaments can seize moments of crises as opportunities to trial and showcase institutional reflexivity, adaptation, and innovation; the inclusion of women's different experiences, perspectives, talents and skills ensures better informed decisions, fairer outcomes, and evolution of 'group think' and traditional ways of doing things.
3. MPs have the opportunity and power to address gender equality as part of their everyday work during and outside of crisis; when the public see themselves as represented among those making decisions that affect their lives, a parliament is likely to be considered more legitimate.
4. Parliaments can lead by example and ensure diversity of views and inclusion when responding to a crisis; research⁴ has shown that women legislators have a high capacity to collaborate across partisan lines, even in the most politically combative environments.
5. Out of crises, arise opportunities for a 'new normal': gender sensitive procedural and budgetary responses of parliaments today can translate to institutional changes that last into tomorrow, and move the world closer to gender equality.

KNOW THE FACTS: IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN⁵

Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex.

UN Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women

INCREASED BURDENS ON WOMEN WHO PLAY A DISPROPORTIONATE ROLE IN DISEASE RESPONSE:

- Globally, women make up 70 per cent of workers in the health and social sector.⁶
- Women are over-represented - and thus more exposed to the virus - among frontline workers such as nurses, paramedics, cleaners, (super)market workers, teachers, and childcare workers - risking infection and their ability to work.
- Before COVID-19 became a universal pandemic, women were doing [three times](#) as much unpaid care and domestic work as men.⁷ When [health systems are overloaded](#),⁸ a greater burden is placed on care in the home and that burden lands largely with women.

INCREASED RISKS TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC SECURITY AND EMPOWERMENT:

- Women are over-represented in sectors hardest hit economically by the pandemic, such as hospitality and tourism, and disproportionately work in insecure labour - putting them at greater risk of losing their incomes in the short, medium and longer term.
- Disruptions, including movement restrictions, can impede women's ability to make a living and meet their families' basic needs as was seen in previous disease outbreaks, such as the Ebola crisis.⁹
- Additional caring burdens might limit girls' access to equal educational opportunities if not monitored; as educational provision moves online, girls and boys will not always have equal access to necessary resources, equipment and basic infrastructure or services.

INCREASED RISKS TO WOMEN'S PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SECURITY:

- Globally, [243 million women and girls](#) aged 15-49 were subjected to sexual and/or physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner in the previous 12 months; emerging data shows that since the outbreak of COVID-19, domestic and [gender-based violence \(GBV\) have increased](#) during the pandemic with households placed under the increased strains that come from security, health and money worries, and cramped, confined living conditions.¹⁰
- Women are forced to stay at home with their abusers, and homeless and [stateless](#) women are rendered more vulnerable with fewer opportunities to find shelter with appropriate health and security requirements.
- Before the pandemic, high proportions of women in parliament, and women parliamentary staff, were subject to [sexual harassment and GBV](#); as GBV trends are worsening with COVID-19, women in politics risk being marginalized further.¹¹

INCREASED RISKS TO WOMEN'S DISTINCT HEALTH NEEDS:

- Social distancing and lockdowns negatively affect women's access to medical care as COVID-19 takes precedence in hospitals.
- Overstretched health services often divert resources away from services women need, including women's access to reproductive services risk being adversely affected as face-to-face engagement with medical workers and access to medicines, assistance with reproductive technologies and (where legal) abortion services, counselling and medical provision, and women's ante- and post-natal care options are likely to be restricted.¹²

INCREASED RISKS TO DEVELOPMENT & HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE BUDGETS FOR GENDER EQUALITY:

- Women and women's organizations rely heavily on foreign aid and humanitarian assistance, including the support of international and local non-government organisations.
- Donors may be tempted to recuperate emergency budgets spent on national responses to the pandemic by reducing their funding to gender sensitive development and humanitarian assistance, setting back any progress on gender equality in the poorest and most conflict-afflicted countries.

See also: [In Focus: Gender equality matters in COVID-19 response](#)

WHAT MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT CAN DO

“As a former MP myself, I know the critical role parliaments can play in health emergencies. Parliaments ensure public health systems are adequately funded. They build accountability through oversight of government actions.”

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO)

LEGISLATE

- Ensure that any emergency response and recovery legislation, emergency and/or relief packages and budgets have been developed on the basis of sex disaggregated data, gender analysis and consultations with gender experts, and include a gender impact assessment.
- Introduce or support amendments to response and recovery legislation, stimulus packages and budgets, social protection policies – or introduce new legislation – that seek to rectify any identified sources of gender discrimination or exacerbate gender inequality.
- Reflect on whether any legislation that was intended to advance women’s rights and was already programmed or expected over the next six to 12 months will be delayed as a result of COVID-19 (e.g. on ending violence against women, protections for women’s reproductive and sexual health and rights, equal pay, elimination of discriminatory laws, or any special measures and other legislation for gender equality) and:
 - Identify and monitor any potential impacts that the delay of this legislation will have on women; and
 - Consider any measures that could be taken to ensure the legislation is not lost or forgotten, such as lobbying for this legislation to remain on the parliament’s agenda.

SCRUTINISE

- Oversee that government’s emergency legislation, relief packages and budgets have specifically responded to known gender policy implications, by asking oral and written questions about:
 - The involvement of women in the government’s COVID-19 response, including who is participating on specialised groups or task forces and who is representing the government to the media;

- The involvement of gender experts in the government’s design of emergency legislation, relief packages and budgets;
- The latest statistics and trends on violence against women and the adequacy of protection/service systems in place;
- Continuous monitoring and evaluation of the gendered implications of the government’s emergency legislation, relief packages and budgets.

- Advocate for the establishment of a gender-focused parliamentary body and/or nominate members to sit on COVID-19 related parliamentary inquiries/hearings that consider related gender policy implications by:
 - Ensuring women’s organisations and civil society organisations with specialised gender expertise, as well as relevant academics are invited to give evidence;
 - Encouraging women MPs and other gender advocates within parliament to join;
 - Considering advocating for inquiries/hearings that are solely dedicated to gender policy implications;
 - Making gender specific recommendations in the report and other parliamentary outputs.
- Use gender budgeting tools to assess the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance and impact of COVID-19 related policy measures on women and girls, specifically by studying any budget cuts and advocating against cuts to programmes or initiatives meant to support women and gender equality.

“Assessing how a budget addresses the needs of women and men is an important part of legislative scrutiny... Gender Sensitive Budgeting tools should be used to assess how COVID-19 support package measures affect women and girls and analyze how budget allocations, budget changes and/or cuts will affect gender equality.”

UN Women Technical Brief: Gender responsive budgeting in the context of COVID-19 (forthcoming).¹³

- Where COVID-19 related gender discrimination and inequality is uncovered, consider (depending on the country context):
 - Speaking with the Minister responsible;
 - Raising the matter on the floor of the House or through other appropriate parliamentary action;
 - Taking the issue up with the designated parliamentary leader and/or women's parliamentary body tasked with responsibility for gender sensitive COVID-19;
 - Networking with members 'across the floor' to propose new legislation or amendments; and/or
 - Raising the issue with the media, women's organizations and/or party leadership.

REPRESENT

- Get a comprehensive analysis of COVID-19's impact on women in your community by reaching out to:
 - National and local gender equality mechanisms, as well as relevant line ministry focal points;
 - Women and feminist organisations, bodies that represent different civil society groups, such as networks, lobby groups, non-government organisations, and international organizations;
 - Trade unions that represent female-dominant workforces (e.g. health workers, super(market) workers, childcare workers, teachers, hospitality and tourism workers);
 - Gender experts including feminist economists, women academics, health professionals and journalists that specialise in pandemics, gender-based violence, gender economics, women's leadership.
- Channel women constituents' voices into COVID-19 decision making by organising virtual town halls (e.g. online or tele-town halls), encouraging text message exchanges or running community online surveys, and sending the results to the relevant Minister or opposition counterpart.
- Nominate, or encourage, women health leaders in the community to crisis management teams and pandemic relief task forces.
- Support the adoption of declarations or statements that promote women's political participation and leadership in COVID-19 response.

ACT AS ROLE MODELS

- Get tested for COVID-19, always practice physical distancing, wash hands/use hand sanitiser as often as practicable and model adherence to all other relevant health guidelines and precautions recommended by relevant global and national health institutions.
- Give women MPs equal access to 'the floor', to showcase their contribution to the crisis response.
- Take a respectful, cooperative and collaborative approach to politics, set aside partisanship, self-interest and competition, denounce any incidences of sexual harassment, bullying and violence against women MPs and staff, and support institutional measures that protect women.



Valparaíso, Chile. May 13, 2020 © Photo: René Lescornez A.

WHAT PARLIAMENTS CAN DO

COMMIT TO A GENDER SENSITIVE RESPONSE

- Acknowledge parliament's commitment to gender equality in all their communications and other parliamentary outputs.
- Endorse a declaration or ministerial statement pledging that COVID-19 and other health crises response and recovery will meet needs of women and girls and be developed with women's political participation.
- Ensure that all laws, policies, and budgets passed in support of COVID-19 response and recovery take into full consideration the needs and interests of women and girls, based on a thorough gender assessment and application of gender responsive budgeting tools, track policy implementation and budget expenditures for their impact on women and gender equality.

CULTIVATE A GENDER SENSITIVE ENVIRONMENT IN PARLIAMENT DURING THE CRISIS

- Apply, enforce or where necessary, revise or develop, codes of conduct that sanction gender insensitive language and behaviour, and institute grievance and disciplinary mechanisms that allow for an immediate redress of any incidence of gender discrimination, bullying, sexual harassment and violence against women.
- Eliminate gender workplace discrimination exacerbated in the response, including by:
 - Consulting Members, MP staff and parliamentary staff to identify key concerns relating to COVID-19 and parliament as a workplace; and
 - Where parliament decides to operate 'remotely':
 - Ensure all MPs and staff have equitable and effective access to digital communication devices (hardware and software) at home;
 - Ensure the disproportionate caring responsibilities of women MPs and staff are adequately compensated;
 - Establish mechanisms to monitor and review digital participation and its effect on work/life balance for MPs and staff.

PRIORITISE WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE PARLIAMENTARY RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS

- By means of amendments to standing orders where necessary, ensure that women MPs and staff are proportionately represented in all face-to-face or virtual parliamentary meetings on COVID-19, including where quorums are applied.
- Showcase – through special debates, commemorations, or other forms of recognition – the contribution of women MPs and staff to the crisis response.

- Guarantee women a place to speak in all parliamentary debates related to the crisis.

INSTITUTE SPECIAL GENDER MAINSTREAMING PROCEDURES TO THE RESPONSE

- Encourage MPs and parliamentary staff to use gender analysis across all policy areas, including by amending the standing orders, instituting new processes, or extending existing ones, to ensure access to sex disaggregated data, and formalising relationships with gender experts across a range of policy areas.
- Task, and adequately resource, specific parliamentary bodies with responsibility for coordinating the parliament's gender sensitive response to COVID-19, such as:
 - A women's/equality committee;
 - A women's caucus or network;
 - A presiding officer/Speaker's Group on Gender and/or Equalities;
 - Parliamentary associations;
 - Gender-focused technical, research or library units;
 - Gender focused networks of elected Members and parliamentary administrative staff (sometimes referred to as workplace equality networks).
- Resource capacity building efforts that strengthen MP and staff ability to mainstream gender considerations across parliamentary work, including the pandemic response.

For examples of how parliaments are responding to COVID-19 with gender in mind, also consult [Inter-Parliamentary Union's \(IPU\) country compilation of parliamentary responses to the pandemic](#).

MONITOR AND EVALUATE THE GENDER SENSITIVITY OF THE CRISIS RESPONSE

- Consider using the attached [Checklist](#) to assess:
 - The actions taken to ensure a gender sensitive parliamentary response to the pandemic;
 - The impact of those actions;
 - Any arising challenges in implementing changes to the parliament's structures and processes, and how were they addressed;
 - Any gender sensitive changes made to the parliament's procedures or outputs during the pandemic that could be maintained in its aftermath.

PREPARE FOR A FUTURE ‘BUSINESS DISRUPTION’

- Incorporate gender sensitive lessons into the parliament’s existing business continuity plan or corporate strategy.

SHARE LESSONS WITH OTHER PARLIAMENTS

- Consider the opportunities that can be taken to share lessons in gender sensitive parliamentary responses with other parliaments regionally or internationally and share those lessons with all MPs and parliamentary staff.

“Building in the needs of women offers an opportunity for us to ‘build back better’. What better tribute to our shared humanity than to implement policy actions that build a more equal world?”

UN Women Deputy Executive Director Anita Bhatia,
“Women and COVID-19: Five things governments can do now”

ENDNOTES

- ¹ WHO, 2019. [Gender equity in the health workforce: Analysis of 104 Countries.](#)
- ² Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UN Women, 2020. [Women in politics: 2020.](#)
- ³ See, for example: Regnér, A. and UN Women, 2020. [Checklist for COVID-19 response.](#)
- ⁴ UN Women. [Facts and figures: Leadership and political participation.](#)
- ⁵ United Nations, 2020. [UN Secretary-General’s policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women.](#)
- ⁶ Ibid, WHO, 2019.
- ⁷ Ibid, United Nations, 2020. UN Secretary-General’s policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women.
- ⁸ UN Women, 2020. [COVID-19: Emerging gender data and why it matters.](#)
- ⁹ Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs, UN Women, Oxfam, Statistics Sierra Leone (2014). Report of the Multisector Impact Assessment of Gender Dimensions of the Ebola Virus Disease in Sierra Leone.
- ¹⁰ UN Women, 2020. [COVID-19 and ending violence against women and girls.](#)
- ¹¹ United Nations, 2018. [Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences to the UN General Assembly on violence against women in politics.](#) A/73/301.
- ¹² See, for example: UNGA A/70/723. [Protecting Humanity from Future Health Crises](#); Report of the High-Level Panel on the Global Response to Health Crises; Measure Evaluation (2017). The Importance of Gender in Emerging Infectious Diseases Data; Smith, Julia (2019). Overcoming the ‘tyranny of the urgent’: integrating gender into disease outbreak preparedness and response, Gender and Development 27(2).
- ¹³ UN Women, 2020. Technical Brief: Gender responsive budgeting in the context of COVID-19 (forthcoming).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

GENDER ISSUES AND COVID-19

- UN Women, 2020. [Policy Brief Series on Ending Violence Against Women and COVID-19.](#)
- UN Women, 2020. [Issue Brief: COVID-19 and Ending Violence against Women and Girls.](#)
- UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), 2020. [Policy Brief N°69: Leaving no one behind: the COVID-19 crisis through the disability and gender lens.](#)
- UN Women, International Development Law Organization (IDLO), UN Development Programme (UNDP), UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), World Bank and The Pathfinders, 2020. [Report: Justice for women amidst COVID-19.](#)
- World Health Organization (WHO) and UN Women, 2020. [Violence against women and girls data collection during COVID-19.](#)

GENDER RESPONSIVE PARLIAMENTARY TOOLKITS

- [EIGE, Toolkit for Gender-Sensitive Parliaments.](#)
- IPU, 2016. [Evaluating the Gender Sensitivity of Parliaments: A Self-Assessment Toolkit.](#)
- [OECD, 2015. “Chapter 3: Gender Sensitive Parliaments” in OECD Toolkit for Mainstreaming and Implementing Gender Equality: Implementing the 2015 OECD Recommendation on Gender Equality in Public Life.](#)
- OSCE, 2017. [Making Laws Work for Women and Men: A Practical Guide to Gender-Sensitive Legislation.](#)
- UNDP, 2009. [A Gender Responsive Parliament: A Handbook on Gender Mainstreaming in the Legislature.](#)

PARLIAMENTS AND COVID-19/CRISIS RESPONSES

- CPA, 2020. [CPA Toolkit for Commonwealth Parliaments and Legislatures on the COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\) pandemic and delivering parliamentary democracy.](#)
- IPU, 2020. [Parliaments in a Time of Pandemic.](#)
- IPU and UNDP 2017. [Global Parliamentary Report 2017 Parliamentary oversight: Parliament’s power to hold government to account.](#)
- UNDP and Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA), 2017, [Advancing the Human Rights and Inclusion of LGBTI People: A Handbook for Parliamentarians.](#)

ANNEX: A CHECKLIST FOR PARLIAMENTS

This Checklist accompanies the Primer for Parliaments: Gender Sensitive Responses to COVID-19. It is offered as a complementary guide for use by MPs and parliamentary staff on gender sensitive options for COVID-19 response and recovery as well as a strategy to ensure gender sensitive parliamentary business and working arrangements, both during and beyond, the pandemic. The Checklist covers four key areas of parliamentary work:

1. Parliamentary Business & Legislation

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted significant changes to all workplaces, including parliaments. Parliaments should consider the impact of these changes on women MPs and staff and adopt a gender mainstreaming approach in their work.

2. Parliamentary Scrutiny & Oversight

Parliaments have the opportunity and power to ensure government responses to the pandemic meet international obligations to the goal of gender equality, eliminate all forms of violence against women and gender discrimination.

3. Parliamentary Representation

In ensuring that women's voices are raised in all COVID-19 related deliberations, MPs should consider targeted consultations with women in their constituencies and communicating their



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