

Impact of COVID-19 on Women: UN urges for Stronger Public Services

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Introduction

The coronavirus has brought a tsunami of collateral impacts on the social, economic and public health systems across the world. Countries are evidently struggling to assess and tackle the consequences of the current crisis. Measures including quarantines, lockdowns, limitations on movement, suspension of domestic- international flights/trains, shutting down of industries, border closures, designating hotspot areas etc., are being taken, yet the virus is increasing day by day and it seems unstoppable.

While the states are struggling with the crisis, COVID-19 has adversely affected people across the world regardless of the region, religion, ethnicity, and gender. However, women owing to the pre-existing gender inequalities have become *particularly* vulnerable to the multifaceted consequences of the current crisis. Women are reported to be experiencing multiple forms of discrimination and violence.² The lockdown measures worldwide are being viewed as a lock down of the girls and women's autonomy by *the reinforcement of the patriarchal attitudes and the discriminatory practices that regard women as second class, the primary caregivers at the household level.*³ Globally, women and girls on average do three times more unpaid care work than men⁴. The closure of offices, schools and

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² See Lara Owen, "Coronavirus: Five ways virus upheaval is hitting women in Asia", Women's Affairs East Asia- BBC, March 2020. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51705199>

³ "Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence", The Guardian, 2020.

Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence>

⁴ See UN Secretary General's Policy Brief: *The Impact of COVID-19 on women*, April 2020.

universities has increased the household work for the women.⁵

The Development and Humanitarian Organization *Plan International* reported that *quarantine measures are increasing the vulnerability of women to domestic violence and a cut off from essential protection services and social networks*⁶. And that *domestic violence is likely to worsen in the context of COVID-19*. The *UN Policy brief, 2020* indicates that there has been an increase in domestic violence cases in France [30% increase], Cyprus [helplines registered an increase 30%], Singapore [33%], Argentina [emergencies calls increased 25%], and so in the U.S, U.K, Canada, Germany, and Spain⁷.

Other concerns reported include the difficulties faced in accessing sexual and reproductive health information services along with contraception, safe abortion and HIV medications.⁸ In the South-East Asia region, women are reported to be particularly vulnerable because they constitute a major share of the health care workforce by contributing 79% of the total health workers. The lack of personal protective devices, menstrual hygiene need

and psychological support, they are at higher risk of facing infections, psychological stress of treating and managing the infection.⁹

II. The CEDAW Committee

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (the CEDAW Committee), which specifically deals with the women issues, has expressed deep concern about the inequalities and heightened risks of gender-based violence and discrimination faced by women due to the current COVID-19 crisis. The Committee has called for joint action and urged member states to uphold the rights of women and girls.

The emphasis is being placed on the institutional mechanisms and the public delivery systems.

In light of COVID 19, General Comments No. 19 and 35 of the CEDAW Committee are relevant. The General Comments obligate States *to adopt appropriate measures to ensure the protection of every woman's right to respect for her dignity and protection of women from all forms of violence, particularly sexual and verbal violence*.¹⁰ The CEDAW

Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women>

⁵ Sini Ramo, "Gendering COVID 19: Implications for Women, peace and Security", Available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2020/04/01/gendering-covid-19-implications-for-women-peace-and-security/>

⁶ Plan International, "How will COVID 19 affect Girls and Young Women?", 2020. Available at <https://plan-international.org/emergencies/covid-19-faqs-girls-women>

⁷ *Supra* note 4.

⁸ See Deborah Bartz, M.D., M.P.H., and Katie L. Watson, J.D., "Abortion during the Covid-19 Pandemic — Ensuring Access to an Essential Health Service", *The New England Journal of Medicine*, May 2020; Deepa

Kansra, "Rights and Obligations during COVID 19: A look at Selected UN Statements", *Be The Classroom Series*, May, 2020.

⁹ Shubh Swain, "Impact of covid-19 on women in developing nations will be harsher" , April 2020.

Available at <https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/opinion-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-in-developing-nations-will-be-harsher-11587570543867.html>

¹⁰ See General Comments No. 19 and 35. Also see, "7 Possible Actions: Women's Rights and COVID 19", Office of the Commissioner of Human Rights- African Union. Available at https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Events/COVID-19_and_Women_Rights_7_Possible_Actions.pdf

committee has urged member states to ensure the protection and safety of the women by providing medical, psycho and social assistance, effective access to justice, safe shelters and rehabilitation. The same requiring concerted action and governance measures.

Quoting the Committee; *member State should develop a protocol for care of women not admitted to such services due to their exposure to COVID-19 which include safe quarantine and access to testing.* Other recommendations of the CEDAW committee include; (a) provision for sexual and reproductive health by providing easy access to sexual and reproductive health information and services such as modern contraceptives, safe abortion, pregnancy (b) raising the awareness about the risk of COVID-19 for the pregnant women. Further the CEDAW Committee requires states *to ensure that rural women enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to housing, sanitation, electricity and water supply* (article 14 of the CEDAW).

In the area of education, the use of mechanisms and platforms to facilitate online classes and learning is not reaching out to girls and women particularly in the rural areas owing to extra household care work, lack of the resources and limited internet access. Recommendations include inclusive alternative educational tools available free of costs.

In light of the increasing risks and vulnerabilities, the Committee has urged

all state parties to ensure data is sufficiently aggregated to inform policy making.¹¹

III. Final Points

Media and government statements coming from across the world are highlighting the increasing incidents of human rights violations against women.

The operation of institutional mechanisms and services to cater to health and related services, access to justice, education platforms is being viewed as of utmost priority. Public health systems, law enforcement support, public transport systems, helplines, online information desks are key to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of women. States are responding in many ways to provide the services needed to fulfil their obligations towards human rights of women. A stronger and responsive public delivery system can be viewed as the key human right to providing for health, justice, education and safety of women today.¹²

¹¹ See the Guidance note on CEDAW and COVID 19.

¹² Quoting the UN Women Executive Director; *COVID-19 provides us with an opportunity for radical, positive action to redress long-standing inequalities in multiple areas of women's lives. This is a time of reckoning for our national and personal*

values and a recognition of the strength of solidarity for public services and society as a whole. This is an opportunity to build back better, stronger, resilient and equal societies.