Ensuring women's equal participation and leadership in COVID-19 decision-making

During the COVID-19 pandemic, as in previous crises, women and women's rights organisations are frequently essential frontline responders, and have invaluable knowledge of what works. If responses to COVID-19 are to be appropriate and effective, then women and their organisations will have to participate, and share leadership, in decision-making over their design and implementation. This briefing proposes specific recommendations on how this can be achieved

The case for women's equal participation and leadership

Emerging research and analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic makes clear that there are significant gendered implications related to both the virus itself and the web of global policy responses. Gender analysis in the design and implementation of all responses to the pandemic is clearly vital. In this briefing, the Gender and Development Network (GADN) focuses on the need to ensure the full, equal and meaningful participation and leadership of women and women-rights organisations in decision-making at all levels to shape the response to COVID-19.

That the pandemic will impact on women differently than men further necessitates a reversal of their exclusion from decision-making which so often renders them conspicuously invisible.[1] There has been a well-documented increase in violence against women and girls[2] as national lockdowns measures were introduced across the globe. Access to sexual and reproductive health and rights has been at risk[3] and the burden of unpaid care work for women will become even greater. Additionally, women are far more likely to be financially and economically vulnerable with nearly 60 percent of women around the world working in the informal economy, in jobs that are insecure and unstable.[4] Women human rights defenders are also likely to be increasingly

targeted and come under attack in light of sweeping state of emergency declarations being passed in many countries. A gender perspective is therefore an essential starting point to understanding the implications and responses to the pandemic.

Women and women's rights organisations and movements provide invaluable knowledge of the local context and the needs of their communities. There is substantial evidence that gender equality in decision-making leads to important, collective gains for everyone in society – particularly when it comes to public health and quality of life.[5] Significantly, there is also substantial evidence that when women's participation in decision-making goes up, both petty and grand corruption go down[6] – an important consideration at a time of heavy spending and international assistance. Women also tend to offer leadership that is more democratic[7], consultative and motivational.[8] In policy-making positions at all levels, women tend to prioritise policy areas that contribute to social infrastructure and the social economy[9] – essential to an effective and equitable recovery. Women's rights organisations were already stretched to their limits before the start of the pandemic, and so including them in decision-making will now make appropriate financial support even more critical.

Recommendations

National and local governments, as well as international organisations should secure the equal participation and leadership of women and girls and their organisations – in all of their diversity – in all COVID-19 related decision making.

To do this we recommend the following measures:

- **Equal voice:** Ensure that women and their organisations are at the table as equals in authority and influence in the design and roll-out of all response measures. This may require the structure and culture of the decision-making body to be challenged and reframed using quotas, targets and other mechanisms. It could also include the removal of barriers to women's meaningful engagement, such as travel and security restrictions, support for childcare, financial constraints, and language issues.

- **Engagement with existing organisations**: Engage with existing informal and formal social networks such as women's rights organisations to ensure they are

included in existing and emerging decision-making structures at the local, regional and national level.

- **Meaningful participation**: Ensure the meaningful participation of women and women's rights organisations in the design of programme responses by providing accessible information to local partners and creating spaces and opportunities for them to contribute, guided by local knowledge and women's priorities.

- **Financial support to enable participation**: Enable women's rights organisations to participate in decision-making, while carrying out front line work, by supporting them with appropriate funding.

- **Voice in the workplace**: Increase women's participation in decision-making in the workplace, including health care providers, to address the specific risk of COVID-19 to women and to take into account women's heightened unpaid care work responsibilities.

- **Longer term social norm change:** Seek to build longer-term transformation into immediate responses by promoting the legitimacy and value of women's political activism and leadership and challenging social norms around women's political leadership to ensure that, post crisis, women are not again excluded from decision-making.

- **Resist roll-back:** On the international stage, support women human rights defenders by exposing and opposing any attempts by governments to use the cover of crisis to roll back women's rights.

- **Use international influence:** Given its global influence and leadership, the Department for International Development (DFID) should ensure that the voices and experiences of women and women's rights organisations are represented in global decision-making bodies.

Recognising the pivotal role that women's rights organisations play in implementing these recommendations, GADN's membership are well placed to support DFID and other agencies to connect directly to trusted partners.

For more information

- See **GADN's website**, where we are also adding briefings on COVID-19, particularly from Southern women's rights organisations
https://gadnetwork.org/covid19

- **Surviving Covid-19: Why we need to listen to African Women's Organisations,** by Jessica Horn, 2020.

  https://awdf.org/surviving-covid19-why-we-need-to-listen-african-womens-organisation/

- **What does feminist leadership look like in a pandemic?** by Leila Billing, 2020.

  https://medium.com/@leila_billing/what-does-feminist-leadership-look-like-in-a-pandemic-35b2ee0eb994

- **Why WHO needs a feminist economic agenda,** by Asha Herten-Crabb and Sara E. Davies, 2020.

  https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30110-0/fulltext

- **Action: Call for a feminist COVID-19 policy,** by Feminist Alliance for Rights, 2020.

  http://feministallianceforrights.org/blog/2020/03/20/action-call-for-a-feminist-covid-19-policy/

- **Gender Implications of COVID,** by Care International, 2020

  https://www.care.org/sites/default/files/gendered_implications_of_covid-19_-_full_paper.pdf

- **Call to Action: Now and the Future,** by Gender Action for Peace and Security, 2020.

  https://gaps-uk.org/covid-19-and-gender-equality-global-peace-and-security/

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