

The Rt Hon Anne-Marie Trevelyan, MP  
The Secretary of State for International Development  
22 Whitehall  
Westminster  
London  
SW1A 2EG

9 April 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

**Re: Gendered Responses to COVID-19**

As the full impact of COVID-19 starts to emerge, we are writing to you as a group of NGOs and networks with deep experience of promoting gender equality within the context of international development, human rights and humanitarian crises. We welcome DFID's efforts so far to respond quickly and effectively to the crisis and the efforts to mainstream gender within its responses. Past experience tells us that the effectiveness of humanitarian and development responses will be strongest if the gender impacts of the pandemic are understood and integrated in the response. As you know, gender analysis is a way of deepening understanding of the impact of a crisis and of how best to respond, rather than a sector that can be de-prioritised.

The most obvious example of the gendered impacts of COVID-19 is Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG), which has already risen dramatically in China<sup>1</sup> and elsewhere. You will be aware that in humanitarian settings, where life saving measures are being prioritised, action on VAWG also saves lives. Also, a matter of life and death is access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), increasingly curtailed during the pandemic, for women and girls in crisis situations. As a result of school closures and increased care burdens, girls' education is being disrupted and the crisis is also likely to increase the risk of child, early and forced marriage, sexual exploitation and adolescent pregnancy.

Unpaid and domestic care work, done predominately by women and girls, will increase dramatically with the consequent negative impacts on women's time, health, safety, and ability to perform paid work, particularly for female headed households. Increased investment in universal social protection and public services thus becomes even more critical to reduce unmanageable unpaid care burdens and ensure adequate provision. Meanwhile many women work outside the formal labour market with no access to social protection, so will need targeted emergency measures such as humanitarian cash transfers, as well as long term access to income. In considering the immediate and longer-term impacts, security sector measures will also be needed to assess the specific implications for women and girls.

Women and girls are not only disproportionately impacted by emergencies like COVID-19 but are often also overlooked and undervalued during the response. In our experience local women's and girls' rights organisations and movements provide invaluable knowledge of the local context and the needs of their communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Fraser, E. (2020) Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence against Women and Girls, VAWG Helpdesk Research Report No. 284. London, UK: VAWG Helpdesk.  
<http://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/1881/vawg-helpdesk-284-covid-19-and-vawg.pdf>

In its COVID-19 response we therefore recommend that DFID include the following approaches:

- Incorporate analysis of the **differentiated impacts** that COVID-19 has on women and girls into all responses, in line with the Gender Equality Act.
- Ensure the **participation and leadership** of women and girls in all COVID-19 related decision making, from local to international.
- Design humanitarian, health risk mitigation and first response interventions with the active engagement of **girls' and women's rights organisations** on the front line of delivery and policy development. This is in order to achieve the most effective solutions that strengthen localised response, reach the most vulnerable and marginalised groups and help dispel myths and misinformation about COVID-19.
- **Ensure ongoing funding and support to carry out critical life-saving services** including VAWG and SRHR as well as education and other interventions which promote gender equality and fulfil women's rights.
- Ensure all **longer-term responses**, including those relating to the macro economic crisis, are gender-sensitive and transformative.

Emerging evidence from our country teams, partner organisations and our collective experience in the field, including during the Ebola epidemic, strongly suggests that gender relations, and the specific barriers faced by women and girls, will influence the impact of the virus and must therefore shape effective responses. Like other areas of humanitarian programming such as shelter and food security, rapid assessments into the gendered impact should inform crisis response programming.

DFID has a key leadership role on gender equality among the donor community and it is now more vital than ever in order to ensure that responses to COVID-19 reach those most likely to be left behind. We hope you can use your influence to encourage other donors to take a gendered approach to humanitarian and long-term responses. As our understanding and learning develops over the next weeks and months, we hope we can support you in this endeavour by sharing our further learning.

Yours sincerely

Signed:

*Girish Menon, CEO*  
**ActionAid UK**

*Laurie Lee, CEO*  
**Care International UK**

*Amanda Khozi Mukwashi, CEO*  
**Christian Aid**

*Laura Kyrke Smith, Executive Director*  
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*Naser Haghamed, CEO*  
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*Danny Sriskandarajah, CEO*  
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*Rose Caldwell, CEO*  
**Plan International UK**

*Caroline Haworth, CEO*  
**Womankind Worldwide**

*Stephanie Draper, CEO*  
**Bond**

*Hannah Bond, Director*  
**Gender Action on Peace and Security (GAPS)**

*Jessica Woodroffe, Director*  
**Gender and Development Network**

*Erica Belanger, Chair*  
**UK SRHR Network**

CC: Baroness Liz Sugg, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development  
James Cleverly, MP – Minister of State for International Development



Network on Sexual &  
Reproductive Health & Rights