

Policy Brief: Gendered Impact of Covid-19 and the vital role of Inclusive Local Governance

June 30th, 2020



We know that the effects of COVID-19 are being felt severely at the local level ([see earlier briefing, 28 April 2020](#)). The outbreak has a profound effect on local public health, an unprecedented impact on local economies around the world and it magnifies existing social issues, including inequality.

The impact of COVID-19 is felt by everyone, both men and women. For women, though, in many developing and fragile countries, they find themselves in a position where their voices and concerns are little heard and few women have access to decision-making power. This while the COVID-19 disease is affecting both sexes differently and the socio-economic secondary effects are also impacting women differently from men. This is true across various spheres, from health to the economy, security to social protection and to the division of roles in government. Women and girls' voices need to be heard, including in decision-making, now more than ever.

Health impact

While early reports reveal that the disease affects the health of men more severely as that of women and as a result, more men are dying as a result of COVID-19 directly. However, the health of women generally is adversely impacted through the reallocation of resources and priorities. Many women find themselves in places of vulnerability and increased exposure to COVID-19, as they work on front line jobs related to the disinfection of municipal public buildings, the cleaning of streets and public spaces and personal care. In many countries we see that the health of women is negatively affected resulting from the closure or reduction of contraceptive and abortion services, as well as pre and post-natal medical follow-ups.

As the COVID-19 pandemic deepens economic and social stress factors coupled with restricted movement and social isolation measures, gender-based violence is increasing exponentially. Women who are being abused by their partner are now being forced into 'lockdown' at home with their abusers at the same time that services to support victims are being disrupted or made inaccessible.

The COVID-19 crisis also impacts the fight against other diseases, like malaria, cholera and measles. In contrast to COVID-19, young children are very vulnerable to these diseases, which heightens the burden on women and puts them at a higher risk of infection as well.

Socio-economic impact

In many parts of the world, women and girls are at a disadvantage, with limited economic assets, education, and job opportunities; and they find themselves further behind due to this crisis.

Women are also more likely to be burdened with the care of family members during the crisis – children home from school and sick relatives.

Some countries were able to launch fiscal stimulus packages and emergency measures to address public health gaps and prevent national economies to collapse. The decision about which industries to support and to save (first) may have a tremendous impact on how the eventual economic cost will be felt by men and women differently. Many women work in unorganized or informal sectors, such as cleaning, babysitters, artisans or food catering jobs. These sectors largely lack any job protection or access to social security or insurance structures. Moreover, unorganized and informal sectors in the economy will find it very challenging to mobilize financial support for their sector.

A few more specific examples of how women find themselves in vulnerable situations during this pandemic :

The World Bank has noted that during previous epidemics, and post-conflict or post-disaster situations, women are likely to be further disenfranchised of their rights to HLP (housing, land and property rights) if their rights are not protected, and cites anecdotal evidence of women being considered an 'extra burden on the household' and put on the street, unmarried women being left without rights on HLP (particularly troubling situations in traditional, customary, polygamous or informal marriage contexts). (For more information see : [The World Bank](#))

Women are also more vulnerable as they have less access to private transportation and can therefore be at a greater risk of coming into contact with the COVID-19 virus. In places where public transport has been shut down, low-paid workers still need to travel and are more exposed to the virus. (For more information see: [URBACT](#))

Limited role of women in decision-making governance structure

The crisis has seen mayors take the lead in protecting and serving their people, sometimes even with expanded authority permitting them to react to a constantly evolving scenario. However, there are notably fewer women around the decision-making table concerning pandemic management and response. For example in Europe, women account for less than 15% of mayors and their involvement in the decision making process of the covid-19 crisis was noticeably limited . This raises questions about governance structure and the space given for female leadership in Europe and elsewhere. Based on our experience in developing countries, women's involvement in decision-making processes is very limited either due to unfavourable governance structure or unfavourable practices considering patriarchal cultures that do not even embrace gendered legal frameworks. As a result, the concerns of women are either unknown or underrepresented at the places where decisions are made. This may lead to unfavourable public health outcomes (the identification of potential virus hotspots) or economic outcomes (disproportional economic damage to women-dominated industries).

What can we do?

It is crucial that all national and local responses also place women and girls - their inclusion, representation, rights, social and economic outcomes, equality and protection - at their centre if they are to have the necessary impacts. This is not just about rectifying long-standing inequalities but also about building more just and resilient local governments. It is in the interest of not only women and girls but also of boys and men. Every policy response that recognizes this will have more impact ([Reliefweb](#)).

Various measures can be taken to address the multitude of issues created or exacerbated by COVID-19 that disproportionately impact women and girls. These range from very generic and practical public policies to help put a brake on the virus and mitigate the impact, as well as specific measures to address the particular challenges of increased domestic violence, crisis response and protecting housing and property rights.

Health & Socio-economic measures

First of all, for all front-line workers, we should assure that proper personal protective equipment (PPE) is available, for those working in high-risk environments. Adequate coordination between local and national levels is required, to allow for central purchasing and distribution to the localities most in need.

Also public spaces should be governed by social-distancing guidelines, which will protect citizens, whilst still allowing most people to go out. Public transportation and market places, which are both usually governed from the municipal level, may require particular attention and will protect many women who are overrepresented in using both.

If we want to protect women and girls from the worst effects of the COVID-19 crisis, we should continue and even strengthen our work on improving the socio-economic standing/position of women. Making sure that at the local level, we are monitoring how women and children are at particular risk to fall behind in education or income. Girls and women facing economic headwinds may take on sex work or other high-risk level activities that will expose them to abuse and other risks. Signalling particular households as vulnerable with local authorities may help them to get the support they need.

For women facing dangerous situations at home, many cities are already responding. Some cities have launched a campaign early on in lockdown, and some local governments have facilitated the use of empty rooms, in collaboration with hotel chains, and with a code word to gain access for women fleeing dangerous environments, while others have made available extra space for women and children to order for them to escape violence.

Social media can play an important role around various themes relating to the response of the COVID-19 pandemic at the local level including violence against women. Whereas social media is a powerful tool for governments to quickly reach citizens, in many contexts it is also the source of conspiracy theories and 'fake news'. To block access to these channels can mean a severe curtailing of citizen's rights and may widen the divide between authorities and the community and ultimately also detract from the goal of mitigating the virus' impact.

In the longer term, we should further continue our work on strengthening the legal position of women with regards to social protection and their rights to housing, land and property rights.

Including women in decision-making governance structures and ensuring gender-sensitive outcomes

Consideration is further needed of the gendered implications of quarantine, such as whether women and men's different physical, cultural, security and sanitary needs are recognised. Experience from past outbreaks shows the importance of incorporating a gender analysis into preparedness and response efforts to improve the effectiveness of health interventions and promote gender and health equity goals.

[\(The Lancet\)](#)

Although general awareness exists that there is a need to include women in decision making for outbreak preparedness and response, we still note that women are underrepresented, also at the local level.

The management of COVID-19 opens the door to a first assessment of the experience of elected municipal women (obstacles, opportunities, spaces of influence), particularly in a context of crisis management.

In order to better understand these processes and provide a supportive mechanism to efficiently fight the pandemic at local level taking an inclusive approach, it would be useful to explore:

- How did municipalities integrate the needs of women, children and people with specific needs into their fight against COVID-19?;
- How did they relay the efforts of the central government to protect the health and physical integrity of women and ensure their safety at work and in their homes?; and
- What was the role of elected women as local leaders in the crisis management?

We try to lead this effort through giving support to municipalities that use an inclusive response, strengthening female leadership in the management of the COVID-19 crisis.

Final programmatic recommendations

Over the past months, VNG International has researched the topic of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on women. At this time we have formulated a number of practical and programmatic responses which we hope to follow-up on in existing and future programming. We recommend that we as the international community :

- Train and support municipal councils as well as other local governments on inclusive governance, focussing on :
 - taking into account the gender-specific outcomes of policy decisions;
 - promoting the participation and influence of underrepresented vulnerable groups;
 - support the response of local governments to specific needs of women and girls and disadvantaged groups;
- Provide technical and financial assistance to elected bodies in municipal councils , so that they can follow up on decisions taken at national and local level, in this context of health crisis and the impact on women and girls in particular;
- Sensitize and train elected municipal officials in the field of preparation, management and recovery from crisis situations, integrating an inclusive and gender-sensitive approach, to for example health crises, ecological crises and socio-economic crises;
- Provide financial and logistical support to municipalities so that they develop an inclusive and gender-sensitive crisis management approach of the current COVID-19 pandemic including an economic and social recovery plan;
- Sensitize and train Civil Society Organisations (including women leaders) on the concepts of gender and female leadership, the design and management of inclusive and gender-inclusive local development initiatives, the design and management of communication and advocacy actions , community mobilization, active listening, etc. ;
- Develop gender-sensitive crisis management tools. VNG International aims to assist the municipalities and subnational governments taking part in its projects to rise to these challenges. Therefore VNG International has set up an online COVID-19 crisis management back office called CriT (Crisis and Transition Support) through which Dutch expertise is shared with foreign municipalities and subnational governments to strengthen their crisis response and turn towards resilience building.
- This involves setting up a standard pandemic management plan, with the responsibility of adapting the municipalities to their specificities by entering the required data. “With robust data, based on consultations with people of diverse identities, municipal governments can craft recovery programs and policies that will address the inequalities that have been deepened as a result of the crisis.” ([Federation of Canadian Municipalities Issue Brief: Gender and COVID-19](#))
- However, the mobilization of additional funds is still necessary in order to develop gender-specific municipal services, to support local associative initiatives aimed, among other things, at combating violence against women, to equip municipalities with the means and tools of telework and communication in crisis contexts and digital gaps based on gender, to develop action plans and budgets that integrate gender and take account of possible crises.

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