



IN FOCUS

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WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND COVID-19: A SNAPSHOT OF UN WOMEN RESPONSE IN THE ARAB STATES



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The COVID-19 pandemic is putting an unprecedented and significant strain on the global economy and public health systems. It is also highlighting, and magnifying inequalities and the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by women and girls. The pandemic has moved beyond a global health crisis and has morphed into a labour market, social and economic crisis, posing a serious threat to women's employment and livelihoods, especially in precarious informal and non-essential sectors.

In the current context, it is vital to adopt short and longer-term solutions to mitigate economic losses and the adverse impact on women's livelihoods during the pandemic in order to position them for economic recovery during and in the aftermath of the pandemic.

In the short term, it is critical to stabilize economic losses of women during the pandemic, protect their employment where possible and reconcile their work obligations with increased burden of care work at home due to closed schools and caring for the sick and elderly. It is also vital to recognize the role of women in the immediate response as part of the economic solutions.

For the longer term, it is essential to establish and strengthen macroeconomic policies and accelerating gender inclusive decision making that channel resources to those most impacted by the crisis and provide social and economic recovery support and other productive resources in the economy in order to benefit women and girls. In policy making during such crises, the opportunity to eliminate discriminatory norms and laws on women's equal participation should be seized, so that both men and women rebuild the economy¹.

In the Arab region alone, ESCWA estimates a USD 42 billion decline in GDP as a result of COVID-19, and the loss of 1.7 million jobs in 2020 with nearly 700,000 jobs lost for women. As women are encouraged to remain out of the work force through taking on longer term domestic duties of care and education, their jobs will likely to be disproportionately affected by lay-offs, and result in a prolonged dip in women's engagement in the paid economy.

This reaffirms that this crisis poses a serious threat to women's engagement in economic activities, which is likely to further increase staggering gender gaps in livelihoods and labour force participation in the region.

¹ COVID-19: time for gender inclusive decision-making. Salma Al-Rashid, Women 20 Engagement Group Sherpa for the G20. OECD. Available at: <https://oecd-development-matters.org/2020/04/21/covid-19-time-for-gender-inclusive-decision-making/>

Some of the effects include²:

- **Impacts on women's economic empowerment.** This crisis poses a serious threat to women's engagement in economic activities in general, but especially in informal sector daily workers, and economic sectors that are hit hard by the pandemic, especially the care sector and the small and medium enterprises, among others. This is likely to increase gender gaps in livelihoods and labour force participation, already showing staggering numbers in the Arab states.
- **The mass shutdown of childcare centres and schools** across the region has left many working parents with little choice but to take time off, or to try to work from home while caring for their children. This practice was supported by national policies and institutional and social practices. The closing of schools affects women disproportionately because much of the responsibility for childcare still falls on them. Flexible working arrangements leave women with the responsibility of carrying out unpaid care work, even for working parents, which affects women's productivity due to double burden.
- **Increased burden of unpaid care work on women and girls.** As health systems become stretched with the outbreak of the COVID 19, many people with COVID-19 will need to be cared for at home, adding to women's overall burden, as well as putting them at greater risk of becoming infected. As statistics show, women perform three to five times more care work than men.
- **Impacts on women migrant workers.** Women migrant workers, many of whom are daily workers who face the risk of losing their source of income, in particular those engaged in domestic and care work, have called attention to the adverse impact of increasingly unpredictable travel bans on their employment, with strong adverse financial implications and ability to support their families.
- **Meeting the needs of women healthcare workers.** Women constitute 70% of the workers in the health and social sector globally,³ and are on the frontlines of the response. Within this sector, an average gender pay gap of 28% exists, which may be exacerbated in times of crises. Women healthcare workers have called attention to their specific needs beyond personal protective equipment, including to meet menstrual hygiene needs. Psychosocial support should also be provided to frontline responders.

Key Strategies for UN Women interventions on Women Economic Empowerment:

General Interventions:

- **Women-led Small and Medium Enterprises:** Assessing impacts on women-led SME's. This will highlight the main challenges facing women entrepreneurs in face of the outbreak of COVID-19 and will provide data on the effective strategies to support women-led small businesses on business continuity and recovery plans. Including women-led businesses in the national recovery plan post COVID-19. Developing women business owners' capacity to develop business and marketing plans to help their businesses survive. Also, special SME packages and financial support need to be tailored at a macro level to ensure their business continuity during and after crisis.
- **Private sector:** Engaging the private sector companies in supporting women led businesses to build their capacities on recovery plans. Enforcing flexible work arrangements and provide technical monitoring support to protect women's and men's labour rights.
- **Women in the informal sector:** Assessing the toll of this pandemic and other global events on women working in the informal sector and addressing their needs to develop effective protection strategies.

² The COVID-19 Outbreak and Gender: Key Advocacy Points from Asia and the Pacific: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/giha_wg_advocacy_brief_covid_19_outbreak_and_gender.pdf

³ WHO (2019). Gender equity in the health work force: Analysis of 104 countries.

- **Cash transfer programmes:** Developing targeted women's economic empowerment strategies, including cash transfer programming, to mitigate the impact of the outbreak and its containment measures including supporting them to recover and build resilience for future shocks.
- **Gender inclusive policy making & advocacy:** Calling on the economic stability and resilience for women-headed households through business coping strategies. Raising women's awareness about their rights and national measures taken to face the outbreak. Conducting gender analysis of the national policies and decisions to identify gender gaps and positive implications and inform policy makers and change agents to address these issues. Advocating for national women's machinery inclusion in policy making to ensure women's voice is heard and reflected in the national policies to face and recover from the pandemic.
- **Women's Employability:** Ensuring that women have the necessary skills to respond the changing labor market needs amid the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic through forming partnerships with specialized training centers/firms to build the capacities of potential women software developers in an accelerated manner to correspond to the rising demands in the ICT sector as well as deliver career development and employability trainings to young women in emerging growing sectors such as e-commerce, ICT, healthcare, food processing and retail.
- **Need for targeted approaches to reaching all social groups** including women and girls with disabilities with risk of lack of proper communication and services.
- **All in all, women are playing an indispensable role in the fight against the outbreak** - as health care workers, teachers, as scientists and researchers, as social mobilisers, as community peace builders and connectors, and as caregivers.

Women Empowerment Principles and COVID-19:

- [Private sector needs to play key role in economic response and recovery programmes.](#) The Women Empowerment Principles (WEPs) are the entry point for [private sector companies to ensure their policies are gender sensitive and inclusive](#), and support families at this critical time through providing flexible work and remote arrangements for women and equitably protecting women's jobs where possible.
- Working with WEPs signatories on initiating a platform to bring together companies and help organize initiatives to address impact of the current pandemic on women-led businesses.
- Launching advocacy campaigns targeting the private sector on the business efficacy of WEPs in the economic recovery during and post crisis.
- Assessing the feasibility of launching regional COVID-19 response fund to address emerging needs of women-led businesses to help them survive through this pandemic.
- Strengthening private public partnerships (PPPs) for the interest of women workers and entrepreneurs.
- Supporting employees with online guidance and training on remote working arrangements and processes.
- Considering paying "hazard pay" to workers in the service industry (a majority of whom are women) to cover at a minimum medical insurance.
- Strengthen accountability mechanisms for the private sector. The gender equality strategies may also include guidelines on risk assessments and business continuity plans to mitigate the impact of the current and any global events.

- Taking into consideration the physical, mental and emotional health of all employees including women with disabilities and being aware that the risk to domestic violence increases with women being confined to home. This include setting up a hotline for all employees.

Snapshot of Country-level Response on WEE and COVID-19:

EGYPT

- Working with the Egyptian National Council for Women on counseling to victims of violence as result of the outbreak and stress on the families.
- Supporting the NCW in developing a monitoring report on the status of women post COVID-19, especially the measures taken by the government in this regard.
- Producing a brief on “women’s needs and gender equality in Egypt’s COVID-19 response”.
- Working on providing cash assistance to women especially in the informal sector through supporting the Ministry of Social Solidarity’s “Takaful programme”.
- Developing a cash transfer programme to migrants and refugees without access to health care or social insurance.
- Data collection on the impact of COVID 19 on women in general, including assessment on women led businesses (MSMEs) through a mobile survey.
- Assessing and highlighting responses of the private sector and WEPs signatories on COVID-19.
- Liaising with CSOs and NGOs on collecting information and areas of collaboration to respond to women’s needs post COVID 19.
- Cooperating with the private sector on developing action plans and supporting women in marginalized communities with PPE (sanitizers, masks, soaps)
- Conducting awareness campaigns on family-friendly policies and other good workplace practices in the context of COVID-19.
- Supporting the Technology Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center (TIEC) of Ministry of Information and Communication Technology with the digitization of its entrepreneurship training program to women entrepreneurs to sustain their access to entrepreneurship educational content during the pandemic and beyond.
- Providing technical (development of online platforms, consultancy support) and financial support to women-led businesses (Micro, Very Small and Small Businesses) in partnership with NCW and Ministry of Trade and Industry.
- Supporting digital and financial inclusion efforts with the promotion of mobile banking and e-wallets especially those targeted towards irregular women workers.
- Supporting the delivery of career development and employability trainings to young women in emerging growing sectors such as e-commerce, ICT, healthcare and food processing & retail. Providing specialized training centers/firms to build the capacities of potential women software developers in an accelerated manner to correspond to the rising demands in the ICT sector.

JORDAN

- In cooperation with the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW), UN Women issued an initial set of recommendations for integrating gender in the COVID-19 planning and response: [“Covid-19 and Gender: Immediate Recommendations for Planning and Response in Jordan”](#), including in terms of economic impact.
- UN Women has re-oriented cash for work into direct cash assistance for women Oasis beneficiaries in both refugee camps and host communities, leveraging its innovative blockchain cash-disbursement system to provide seamless and remote assistance to Syrian refugee women in the camps.
- UN Women is in the process of developing a case study of the blockchain pilot to scale it up to all beneficiaries in the camps, which will include a specific section on its benefits in responding to the COVID crisis.
- UN Women is conducting a gender review of Defence Orders issued by the Government, circulating policy recommendations among key partners to address gaps. The government economic recovery team and Defence Order n. 6 have prioritized protecting employment in the private sector. UN Women is providing technical expertise through the national women’s machineries, as well as conducting advocacy to promote the establishment of specific monitoring mechanisms to ensure vulnerable workers, including women, have accessible complaints mechanisms to protect their employed status as per Defence Order n.6.
- At the end of 2019 UN Women drafted a policy paper on gender and fiscal policy. UN Women is now building on that with a policy paper on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Jordan’s inclusive economic growth and gender responsive design of economic policy measures in response to the crisis.
- In cooperation with partners in civil society (JBPWA) and JNCW, UN Women is conducting a survey of women in the private sector to assess their urgent needs in response to COVID-19 in regard to their economic participation in the labour market. The assessment’s findings will inform UN Women plans to respond to COVID-19 impact on women’s SMEs.
- UN Women is developing and will disseminate messages to the private sector in alignment with the Women’s Empowerment Principles about the importance of women’s economic participation, the return of investment and benefits for the workplace, marketplace and the community.
- UN Women is working on an impact assessment of the Covid-19 pandemic on women’s economic empowerment focusing on job and income loss, affected economic sectors in terms of higher layoffs among working women and the most affected population categories. The assessment will include interpretation scenarios, the estimated impact of unpaid-care responsibilities and how it will affect women’s economic participation.
- UN Women is providing strategic advice and technical expertise to key national stakeholders engaged in the design and implementation of the national response on integrating a gender perspective, collecting gender data and on the gender analysis of macroeconomic indicators.
- UN Women is providing technical expertise to UNDP and ILO to conduct a large-scale survey to assess the impact of COVID 19 on small, medium and large companies.

PALESTINE

- Producing gender disaggregated data, statistics and analysis at the micro and macro levels and household surveys, in partnership with civil society, trade unions, government and sister agencies (UNIDO, the World Bank and OECD), on the economic impact of COVID-19 on women, especially women-led SME's and establishments, female heads of households, women with disabilities, and women working in the most affected economic sectors, and assess their emerging needs.
- Cooperating with local NGO partners to provide women entrepreneurs with technical skills and advice on digital marketing during crisis, e-commerce and business continuity during and after crisis, based on preliminary results of a needs assessment conducted by UN Women.
- Through UN Women and PMA ongoing collaboration on inclusion of women and mainstreaming gender in the banking sector, UN Women is providing technical assistance and guidance for a gender sensitive policy making.
- Cooperating with the Financial Inclusion Gender Task Force to influence gender inclusive policy making and production of gender inclusive financial and non-financial services.
- Conducting virtual campaigns and messaging in cooperation with governmental service providers to support women's business continuity during and after crisis, to avoid losing their income and access to the market and services.
- Coordinating with private sector, including WEPs signatories, to influence policy making and financial product development that adhere to women's needs.
- Documenting best practices of the private sector WEPs signatories on COVID-19 responses in relations to the protection of women workers and their labour rights.
- Targeting women workers, especially the lowest paid, in the informal sector in the most affected economic sectors to promote the protection of their rights during and after crisis and their equal access to services.
- Collaborating with civils society organizations to promote equal sharing of household responsibilities, through producing messaging related to sharing household responsibilities and challenging the social norms, especially during the current crisis.

LEBANON

- UN Women in Lebanon is working with different parts of the government to ensure the needs of women and girls are being addressed in the COVID-19 response. This includes cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs on issues of social protection, as the national lead on Lebanon's emergency cash transfer programming and the Ministry of Interior and the National Commission for Lebanese Women on issues of domestic violence and gender-based violence more broadly. This has included the provision of technical assistance and the rapid deployment of technical staff.
- Working with partners, namely civil society to re-align training and job placement programmes to the current context, utilizing virtual meetings and providing unconditional cash to those enrolled in UN Women livelihoods programmes (so that livelihoods are not lost as a result of COVID).
- Re-alignment of productive sector partnerships for the creation and distribution of PPE (masks and gowns) and the establishment of community kitchens to provide free meals to individuals at risk.

- Continuing engagement with the private sector through the WEPs through virtual meetings and workshops, with a focus on how the private sector can help mitigate the impact of COVID on women's engagement in the economy.
- Engagement with the Government of Lebanon on issues of social protection and economic stimulus, through a UN Joint Programme with UNICEF, UNDP, ILO and WFP.
- Economic modeling on the impact of the economic crisis (exacerbated by COVID) on women's engagement in the labour market.

MOROCCO

- As part of the government's response to assist vulnerable citizens who lost their income due to the crisis, women who have lost their jobs are registered with social security and those registered under the national RAMED health coverage plan will receive/are receiving cash assistance. Women who work in the informal sector will also receive a financial assistance. This is particularly important since about 50% of women's employment is unpaid (2/3 are women working in rural areas) and 70% are in low or unskilled jobs.
- UN Women will be conducting a web-based survey which will look, amongst other things, at potential change in employment status and financial burdens/status due to COVID-19.
- On the topic of the increased burden of domestic and family responsibilities during the confinement period, UN Women is working on launching a sensitization campaign on positive paternities/masculinities in order to engage men and boys in actively participating in domestic and family responsibilities and ensure a lower percentage of women's job loss.
- Development of an online platform/digital solutions to allow cooperatives (Olive, WFP, Argan, honey, cheese, etc.) to continue to operate and sell their products during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Implementation of a training platform (E-Learning) for women entrepreneurs/self-entrepreneurs etc. on women's leadership in times of crisis.
- Conducting an online survey to rapidly assess the impact of COVID-19 on micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) run by women in Morocco.
- Analysis of data from the HCP (The High Commission of Planning) qualitative survey on the socio-economic impact of the corona virus crisis on Moroccan households.

TUNISIA

- Implementation of online training for women's economic empowerment.
- Relaunching the national PPP plan to involve women in the private sector during and after COVID 19 (with banks and companies).
- Supporting women's economic initiatives with UNDP during COVID 19. Launching innovation challenges in the three governorates to finance 6 initiatives made by women in response to COVID-19 and that meet the needs of their cities during this period.
- Accelerating the adoption of the social and solidarity economy law with a gender approach, in middle term.

LIBYA

- UN Women conducted a [flash, online survey](#) to capture the impact of COVID 19 on women, with the support of the Libyan Women's Peacebuilding Network. The survey also included individual women as well as national institutions and civil society organisations from a variety of geographical areas in Libya to understand the COVID-19 preparedness and response plans from a gender perspective. Sixty per cent of the sampled women feared the outcome of the lockdown arrangements, including the financial difficulties that the families would face.
- Developing programmes that focus on supporting women's self-employment and business start-up while combating stereotypes about women's roles to promote women's engagement in the private sector and "non-traditional" fields.
- Ensuring that future projects, operations and initiatives to stabilise Libya mainstream gender equality and women's empowerment through shedding light on gender stereotypes and restrictions that prevent women from reaching their potential in contributing to critical economic activities in Libya and alleviate the domestic burden shaped by gendered stereotypes.



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