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Report on the policy measures adopted by the Egyptian Government to ensure a gender-sensitive national response to the COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic is harming health, social and economic well-being worldwide and in Egypt – with women at the centre. Women make up the majority of the health-care workforce and provide the bulk of unpaid care, putting them at a greater risk of infection. Women are also shouldering much of the burden at home, given school and childcare facility closures and longstanding gender inequalities in unpaid work. Women also face high risks of job and income loss, of particular concern for women-headed households. Women also face increased risks of violence, exploitation or abuse during times of crisis and quarantine. Recent outbreaks of other diseases, such as the Ebola and Zika, diverted resources away from services that women need, even as their burden of care increased and their livelihoods suffered. Recognizing the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures affect women and men differently is essential. Policy responses must be immediate, and they must account for women’s concerns.

The Government of Egypt has been quick to act, introducing measures to control the spread of the novel coronavirus and to cushion its social and economic impacts. On 14 March 2020, a presidential decree allocated EGP 100 billion to fund the Comprehensive Coronavirus Response Plan and precautionary measures included therein. Nurseries, schools and university classes were initially suspended for two weeks (since extended and ongoing).

As the potential socioeconomic impact of an extended national lockdown became apparent, the Government then moved to implement a series of measures to cushion the blow for its citizens. United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres reportedly lauded these measures during a videoconference with African Member States of the United Nations, stating that they are ‘a good example of an early response for curbing the spread of COVID-19’.¹

Earlier in April, UN Women Egypt expressed its appreciation for the Government’s efforts to ensure that the COVID-19 response is more effective for everyone, including for women and girls, and commended the National Council for Women (NCW) for its efforts to ensure a gender perspective is adopted in Egypt’s COVID-19 response plan.²

The NCW issued a policy paper outlining ‘*Egypt’s Rapid Response to Women’s Situation during the COVID-19 Outbreak*’, which includes an analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on women and the short and medium term response measures adopted by the government of Egypt in response to the Covid-19 outbreak, grouped according to the following pillars: a) impact on human endowment (health, education and social protection); b) women’s voice and agency (eliminating violence against women, and women’s leadership and representation); c) impact on economic opportunities for women, and d) promoting data and knowledge. The paper also

¹ Ahram Online. 16 April 2020. “UN chief praises Egypt’s measures to curb spread of coronavirus as ‘good example’.” Available at <http://english.ahram.org/NewsContent/1/64/367447/Egypt/Politics-/UN-chief-praises-Egypt%E2%80%99s-measures-to-curb-spread-o.aspx>

² UN Women Egypt. 7 April 2020. “UN Women commends the National Council for Women for its efforts to ensure that a gender perspective is adopted in Egypt’s COVID-19 response plan.” <https://egypt.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2020/04/unw-commands-ncw-efforts-to-ensure-that-a-gender-perspective-is-adopted-in-egypts-covid19-response>

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calls for additional measures to be taken in each of these areas. Furthermore, NCW issued a Gender Policy Tracker to examine the government's response to the crisis through a gender lens. The Gender Policy Tracker underlines the importance of designing and adopting preparedness and mitigation strategies that cover the needs of all affected groups and respond to the different impacts on both men and women. Collectively, these efforts reinforce the NCW's mission to provide evidence-based policy advice to ensure that gender perspectives are properly addressed in Egypt's COVID-19 response.

Women segments of the population disproportionately impacted by COVID-19

Although the entire population is impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak, some groups of women are more prone to its threats. The NCW's policy paper singles out some of those who are most vulnerable:

- women with health conditions, such as immune diseases, as well as pregnant/lactating women
- elderly women
- women with disabilities
- women in need and with less access to urban services
- front-liners and workers at health facilities
- women at orphanages, elder-care facilities or shelters
- women of reproductive age
- women heads of households
- women in fragile and informal work sectors (including temporary contracted women, domestic workers, street vendors)
- women working in the tourism sector
- women in the less-skilled labour force, who are at greater risk of losing their jobs
- NCW community workers involved in the knocking-doors awareness campaigns
- women in microbusinesses, with a special focus on the handicrafts' sector due to Egyptian women's dominance of that sector, as well as women working in agriculture.

Source: NCW. 30 March 2020. Policy paper: 'Egypt's Rapid Response to Women's Situation during the COVID-19 Outbreak'.

The present report seeks to detail and analyse the COVID-19 response measures introduced by the Government of Egypt in light of the recommendations made in the NCW's policy paper and Gender Policy Tracker for the period 4 March-6 April 2020. The focus is on five main areas: 1) **health**; 2) **social protection**; 3) **education and the burden of unpaid care**; 4) **voice and violence prevention** (including eliminating violence against women and increasing women's leadership and representation); and 5) **economic impact**. It also details efforts to provide gender-specific knowledge and data for evidence-based policies.

HEALTH

Women are more likely to be front-line health workers, comprising around 42.4% of doctors and 91.1% of nursing staff currently working for the Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP), as well as 73.1% of nursing staff in hospitals and therapeutic facilities in the private sector.³ Women in the health sector are more likely to be exposed to the virus and deal with enormous stress and mental health issues while balancing paid and unpaid work roles. Meanwhile,

³ CAMPAS. 2018. As cited in NCW. 30 March 2020. Policy paper: 'Egypt's Rapid Response to Women's Situation during the COVID-19 Outbreak'.

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overwhelmed health services may limit access to family planning services and contraceptives, potentially leading to a rise in fertility rates and interrupted access to reproductive healthcare. Given that pregnant women require antenatal care and delivery services, which can expose them to infections in health facilities, this may discourage their attendance, which could potentially increase maternal mortality. Given lower levels of literacy among women and girls (31% of females over age 10 are illiterate, versus 21% of males, and rates are higher in rural areas and among the elderly)⁴, it is important that health-related messaging on protection and prevention be relayed through materials that are accessible and understandable by all.

Government response:

- On 16 March, Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) announced special measures to dispense medicines for those with chronic diseases, formula and contraceptives for three months.
- On 19 March, the Ministry of Social Solidarity (MoSS) announced it was providing all health precautions and awareness-raising leaflets in all facilities for at-risk groups.
- On 22 March, the Government resolved to launch a set of COVID-19 awareness-raising campaigns to provide precise information and strengthen health controls according to the highest standards, at the points of entry to the country.
- On 29 March, the President issued a decision to increase the monthly allowance for medical professionals working in isolation, fever, chest hospitals and central laboratories by 75% and establishing a 'risk fund' to benefit medical professionals.
- On 2 April, economic protection for health workers was expanded, with the provision of additional support by increasing bonuses for medical interns in university hospitals under the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and Al-Azhar University hospitals, to EGP 2200 per month (up from EGP 400), as of the December 2019 class.
- On 5 April, The Ministry of Health launched 2 hotlines to provide necessary psychological support to citizens at home

NCW recommendations yet to be addressed:

The NCW calls for priority support to women on the front lines of the response, for instance, by improving access to personal protective equipment and menstrual hygiene products for health-care workers and caregivers.

The NCW has recommended ensuring that a sufficient stock of hygiene kits as well as necessary medical supplies (including family planning methods for women as well as sanitary pads) and provision of care through mobile clinics and emergency facilities. Egypt should also continue existing programmes such as the "Etneen Kefaya" (Two is Enough) campaign, launched in collaboration with the UN in 2018 to raise awareness on the importance of birth control and providing contraceptive methods.

Beyond providing awareness campaigns at points of entry, the NCW calls for a national communications strategy for women on prevention (including nutrition to increase immunity, using affordable natural ingredients), as well as step-by-step programmes to help caregivers deal with suspected COVID-19 patients at home. These messages should be tailored to women

⁴ 2017 Census data.

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from different backgrounds, with materials that are accessible/understandable to those who cannot read and be made available through digital platforms as well as national TV and radio channels. The NCW specifies that messaging must urge pregnant women to continue with their prenatal care and seek out assisted deliveries. Moreover, awareness messages outlining all available health-care services should be tailored to elderly women and women with disabilities.

To address women's mental health needs, the NCW recommends providing psychosocial support and therapy packages, by: developing online-recorded psychological sessions to raise awareness about the impact of COVID-19 and steps to endure the pressure; encouraging community-based solutions, such as volunteer therapists who can support healthcare-providers and especially caregivers; awareness-raising on how to deal with family stress; and conducting online group therapy sessions and family counselling. It also recommends developing long-term psychological support programmes for women, especially women caregivers, doctors and hospital front-liners.

SOCIAL PROTECTION

All Egyptians face potential health risks from COVID-19, but those most likely to suffer seriously are those with underlying medical conditions and the elderly – a group in which women are disproportionately represented. Of particular concern high-risk populations such as migrants, people with disabilities and those living in urban settlements, prisons and locations already underserved by social services – where information and strategies such as testing, handwashing, self-isolation and quarantine will be particularly difficult, due to lack of space, resources and services. And households led by single mothers are particularly vulnerable. Food security is a concern given the expected disruptions of global food supply chains, as UN agencies warn: “access to food will be negatively affected by income reductions and loss of employment as well as availability of food in local markets.”⁵ Moreover, In 2018, 80% of women versus 63% of men did not have access to health insurance. Due to the low levels of women's labour force participation, they are much more likely to fall out of health insurance coverage⁶.

Government response:

- On 19 March, the Ministry of Social Solidarity (MoSS) announced it was intensifying precautionary measures for children in foster homes and providing all health precautions and awareness-raising leaflets in welfare homes, correctional institutions, orphanages, nursing homes, social protection facilities, people with disabilities, and women's centres.
- On 22 March, MoSS announced it would increase the number of beneficiaries of cash transfers from Takaful and Karama programmes to reach 100,000 households (wherein 80% of current recipients are women). MoSS also announced it would integrate women aged 65 and above in nursing homes under the umbrella of social protection. Such measures represent costly and tremendously important extensions of Egypt's social security net to ensure it reaches those most vulnerable.

⁵ Food and Agriculture Organization. 21 April 2020. “Joint Statement on COVID-19 Impacts on Food Security and Nutrition” <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/1272058/icode/>

⁶ According to ELMPS 2018, among women generally age 18-64, only 15% have health insurance. Among employed women only 46% report having health insurance. Among wage worker women 66% have health insurance (calculated by Caroline Kraft)

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- In its 2020/21 budget, announced on 30 March, Egypt increased pensions by 14% and increased the allocations for social housing support. To facilitate payments, pension payments are scattered over different days (depending on the level of your payment) and schools are also being used as payment sites.⁷
- On 6 April, the President of the Republic instructed the government to upscale the provision of decent housing for low income segments by building 250,000 new housing units and another 100,000 housing units for persons living in unsafe areas.

NCW recommendations yet to be addressed:

Many of the measures enacted respond to NCW recommendations on the need for immediate and increased social protection programmes. Some aspects that remain to be addressed include an immediate increase in food commodities (offered through ration cards) and subsidized goods and discounts to cover all basic needs of women affected by the outbreak. To compensate for school meals not being delivered, the NCW recommends that the Government increase points on the food subsidy card to ensure nutrition-sensitive responses to the outbreak.

The NCW specifies that women – especially those in female-headed households – must also be identified and included in all cash and any other livelihood interventions, in ways that are safe for them to access. For example, cash transfers can be made quickly through E-Wallets. To ensure women’s access to identification documents, it recommends upscaling the National ID Programme for women and initiating a digital mechanism to remotely enrol women in social security programmes. National awareness-raising on how to enrol in any social protection programmes (including ID issuance), will also be essential.

For elderly women and those living with a disability, the NCW recommends implementing specific online community actions designed to reduce exposure to COVID-19 and creating a national supply distribution helpline (for medicine, advice, etc.). Given the fact that formal elder-care programmes in Egypt are not that prevalent, and family support is the most common practice, additional measures to help household caregivers could be useful, not only during this period, but in the long-run.

EDUCATION AND THE INCREASED BURDEN OF CARE

Norms dictate that Egyptian women are the main caretakers of the household. With health systems overloaded and children at home due to school closures, women across the country are shouldering the added burden, from home-schooling to looking after children, the elderly and sick, to performing household chores and ensuring increased cleanliness, which is having a negative impact on their levels of income. Girls home from school are also more likely than boys to be asked to contribute to domestic work and care, thereby missing out on home-based learning. As a result, parents may pressure their daughters to drop out of school to care for siblings and do other unpaid domestic work, contribute to supporting the household financially, or marry and have children when they are still children themselves.⁸

⁷ Ugo Gentilini, Mohamed Almenfi, Ian Orton & Pamela Dale. 17 April 2020. “Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures (“Living paper” version 5).” ILO, UNICEF, World Bank.

⁸ NCW. 30 March 2020. *Policy paper: ‘Egypt’s Rapid Response to Women’s Situation during the COVID-19 Outbreak’*. p. 2.

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Government response:

- On 14 March, the President issued a decree to suspend classes in universities and schools for two weeks (extended and ongoing) and since then, the Ministry of Education has enacted policy measures to ensure continuity of learning by providing learners with free access to online platforms and providing users with extra internet free bundles to compensate for increased internet usage. Partnership with the ministry of communication has been made to facilitate access to services and increase the speed of the internet. TV based learning and other online platforms such as YOU TUBE TV are also being used in Egypt⁹.
- On 16 March, Decree No. 719 granted working mothers in the public sector whose children are under 12 years old exceptional leave, as well as special leave for working mothers caring for children with special needs.
- On 22 March, in celebration of Egyptian Women's Day, the President of the Republic conveyed a number of messages to confront the risks of coronavirus and issued a set of economic and social protection resolutions to support and protect all social groups. In his speech, he recognized the role and status of Egyptian women and the importance of continuing their supportive roles during this crisis¹⁰.

NCW recommendations yet to be addressed:

Although the government's measures assist working mothers who must care for children under 12 and children of any age with special needs, the NCW also recommends more flexible measures for employers whose employees are caregivers of old or disabled family members.

In terms of education, the NCW urges efforts to be made to incentivize parents to allow their children to return to school after schools reopen and encourage families to use distance-learning solutions, such as using educational applications, platforms and resources. Where there is only one device or computer per family, families should ensure that girls and boys be given equal access.

The NCW advocates accelerating the proposed draft law criminalizing child marriage to take its legal course and be issued, to ensure that the impact of the closure of the schools will not increase the number of child marriages. It calls for strengthening and enhancing the promotion of the child helpline of the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM), through different media and means.

VOICE AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Global experiences have demonstrated that in such stressful and challenging times, heightened risk of different kinds of violence (e.g., psychological and physical) might affect women. Lockdowns and quarantine policies exacerbate conditions for those already experiencing or vulnerable to domestic violence, as survivors are in isolation with their abusers. The stress of the economic downturn is also likely to exacerbate individual and household stress. In Egypt,

⁹ Alternative Solutions to School Closure in Arab Countries to Ensuring THAT LEARNING NEVER STOPS: COVID-19 EDUCATION RESPONSE (UNESCO).

¹⁰ UN Women advocates that government messages advocate for a more equal distribution of household work between men and women.

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an estimated one in four women were already experiencing domestic violence prior to this pandemic.¹¹ Strengthening the leadership and meaningful participation of women and girls in all decision-making processes in addressing the COVID-19 outbreak gives them the chance to positively influence the design and implementation of Egypt's response policy and strategy. Better inclusion of women front-line workers in health and other sectors in all decision-making and policy spaces can improve health security surveillance, detection and prevention mechanisms. Women also play a major role as conduits of information in their communities, in spite of their typically lower access to information, as opposed to men. Thus, reaching women and girls and educating them on the disease, is crucial to tackling the spread.

Government response:

- On 19 March, the Ministry of Social Solidarity (MoSS) announced that it is intensifying the precautionary measures for children in foster homes and providing them with health precautions and awareness-raising leaflets, including those in welfare homes, correctional institutions, orphanages in addition to nursing homes, social protection facilities, people with disabilities, and women's shelters; protection of elderly women and women with disabilities living in the shelters; and preparedness to receive cases of violence against women through safe shelters.
- According to the NCW's first Gender Policy Tracker, covering the period from 14 March-5 April, the Government has been "particularly keen to integrate the needs of Egyptian women into the entire decision-making process and in the implementation of its programmes in order to ensure women's protection against socioeconomic and psychological repercussions."¹²
- The membership of The National Council for Women (NCW) in the ministerial committee formed for irregular workers affected by the economic repercussions reflects the government's belief in the importance of women's voice & agency through representation, participation & involvement in the process of decision making and taking into account the needs of Egyptian women while designing the policies and strategies aimed to respond and mitigate the impacts of the new Coronavirus
- The Women's Complaints office of The National Council for Women is receiving phone calls on its hotline from women who have been negatively impacted by the coronavirus and continued to strengthen its linkages and channels with concerned organizations for a more effective referral and response to women's complaints.

NCW recommendations yet to be addressed:

The NCW policy brief calls for enhancing psychosocial, legal and counselling support to be made available for women who may be affected by the outbreak – which can be done through the NCW's Women Complaints Office, which has branches in all 27 governorates and is mandated to offer legal consultations and services for women free-of-charge in cases of violence or discrimination. It also recommends intensified preventive measures such as: 1) promoting the NCW's Complaints Office hotline; and 2) upgrading its capacities through COVID-19-related guidelines. Furthermore, NCW recommends upscaling the social services provided by MoSS to

¹¹ CAPMAS. 2014. Egypt Demographic and Health Survey. <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR302/FR302.pdf>

¹² NCW. 5 April 2020. "Monitoring Gender-Responsive Policies and Programs During the New Coronavirus Pandemic: First Report: 14 March-5 April 2020." p. 1.

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provide shelters for possible homeless girls who can easily catch COVID-19 and be exposed to violations, especially during lockdown hours.

The NCW also asks for enhancement to its own capacities to deal with the situation efficiently and effectively, by strengthening its technological infrastructure as well as providing necessary guidelines to intensify precautionary measures to prevent COVID-19 infections.

NCW lauds the government's consideration of women's needs and stresses on the importance of women's voice and leadership in the decision-making circles. It states that women's integration into decision-making can enhance health security, examination and protection of health, and ensure women's access to relevant information. As such, it recommends strengthening the leadership and meaningful participation of women in all decision-making processes in addressing the COVID-19 outbreak, as well as ensuring women's representation in designing policies and strategies in response to COVID-19. Moreover, it reiterates the need to ensure that women can get information about how to prevent and respond to the pandemic in ways they can understand.

ECONOMIC:

The COVID-19 crisis is not only a health crisis, but also an economic and employment one. Disruptions, including movement restrictions, are likely to compromise women's ability to make a living and meet their families' basic needs. In Egypt, where women's labour force participation stood at 23.8%¹³, the crisis will likely have long-term and disproportionate impacts on women. Egyptian women are more likely to work informally (33.9%), in short-term, part-time jobs with poor working conditions and limited social and health insurance. This makes their jobs more vulnerable to cuts or lay-offs during an economic downturn. This is all the more daunting for single mothers, and women-headed households who make up 18.1% of Egyptian households.¹⁴ Given the nature of the current crisis, there is a need to address two interconnected issues. First, support women workers whose livelihoods are affected because they are unable to work due to quarantines, health concerns or sickness; or who have seen their income from self-employment fall due to lower demand; or because their workplace has been closed, laid-off employees or given workers fewer hours. Second, support is needed for businesses that have been forced to close or are seeing their revenues decrease significantly.

Government response:

- On 16 March, a decree was issued to reduce the number of employees in the public sector. It nevertheless included protections – such as granting pregnant employees and working mothers whose children are under 12 years old, and those caring for children with special needs, exceptional leave throughout the decree.
- On 22 March, MoSS announced it would increase the number of beneficiaries of soft loans and loans with negligible interest rates to set up microenterprises so that they can improve the living standard of their families.

¹³ World Bank. 2019. "[Labor force, female \(% of total labor force\)](#)"

¹⁴ CAPMAS. 2020. As cited in NCW. 30 March 2020. *Policy paper: 'Egypt's Rapid Response to Women's Situation during the COVID-19 Outbreak'*.

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- On 22 March, MoSS increased the monthly income for rural women leaders, from EGP 300 to EGP 900/month – a potent signal of their important role.
- On 24 March, the Ministry of Manpower (MoM) announced steps to register casual workers on the MoM website, so they could receive an exceptional allowance of EGP 500 (for three months), as part of the State plan to protect this group. Registration is still open and is expected to cover 1.5 million individuals, etc.¹⁵ Notably, the Government’s stimulus package provides more incentives for sectors that have high female labour force participation, such as agriculture (36.4% of all female employment is in agriculture¹⁶).
- On 26 March, the Prime Minister established a Workers’ Emergency Benefits Fund and formed a committee for affected workers. It is composed of the Minister of Planning and Economic Development, Minister of Manpower, Minister of Social Solidarity, Chair of Information and Decision Support Center, Head of the Suggestion and Complaints Committee of the National Wage Council, a member of the Administrative Control Authority, and – importantly – the President of the NCW. The Committee shall be responsible for: collecting data on affected workers; coordinating efforts and initiatives introduced by financial institutions, businesses, NGOs and other concerned bodies; coordinating with the Workers’ Emergency Benefits Fund; and developing policies for workers’ compensation.
- On 29 March, the President announced the disbursement of exceptional bonuses from the “Tahya Misr” Fund for all workers in quarantine, or in hospitals and central labs across Egypt. The Central Bank of Egypt (CBE) also issued a set of resolutions on microfinance activities for the benefit of 3.1 million citizens, including: reducing or postponing installments due from clients by 50% of the value of each installment for microfinance clients; and exempting microfinance clients who make timely payments from the commission on prepayment or indebtedness, or reducing the administrative fees to renew existing funding. Notably, women constitute over 70% of microfinance clients.

NCW recommendations yet to be addressed:

Although the Government’s economic measures announced thus far have been comprehensive, the NCW’s recommendations similarly include a long list. Those that have not yet been addressed include the need to direct and reallocate donor partner agency funds towards developing technological infrastructure, especially in remote areas, as well as to projects that can uplift the IT sector, encouraging more women to engage. This would be coupled with widespread awareness-raising campaigns on telework for women, part-time work arrangements and basic financial/digital literacy programmes.

The NCW also recommends conducting a market assessment, income-generating activities assessment, and economic analysis to identify and highlight the types of start-ups that are of potential growth in the future, due to the changes in the entrepreneurship ecosystem. For later interventions, it suggests developing targeted women’s economic empowerment strategies as well as economic support programmes and packages for women under the umbrella of the Ministry of International Cooperation (MoIC) and the NCW’s Egypt Gender Accelerator, in partnership with the World Economic Forum.

¹⁵ Ugo Gentilini, Mohamed Almenfi, Ian Orton & Pamela Dale. 17 April 2020. “Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures (“Living paper” version 5).” ILO, UNICEF, World Bank.

¹⁶ LMS

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The NCW urges the Government to enhance the financial inclusion of women through upgrading and upscaling the Savings Groups programme, promoting the use of E-Wallets for women and building on the pilot for digitizing the Savings Groups model.

For women-owned businesses/SMEs, the NCW recommends tailored packages providing financial and non-financial assistance to help them cope with business disruptions and collaborating with technology companies to provide SMEs and the self-employed with free/discounted access to Internet and technological tools. The NCW, through the Women's Business Development Centre, will use their social media platforms to highlight women in the microbusiness sector to support them in networking and linkages to SME-led businesses and the private sector for exposure. This can be an opportunity for the business sector as well to interact with skilled home-based labour – a win-win situation amid social distancing.

The NCW recommends creating an interactive digital referral pathway for information, allowing timely access to each target group and directing them to different services. It also advocates investment in digitalizing female-run businesses and developing online platforms to allow cooperatives and female-run handicraft services to continue to operate.

It equally backs revamping MSMEDA's efforts of deploying "cash-for-work" through labour-intensive public works programmes, which can play a role in helping the Government address temporary women's unemployment. Jobseekers in the agricultural or urban informal sector particularly can benefit from public works in times of crisis. Public works programmes that are well-designed (in terms of the length of the employment contract and the level of wages) can provide adequate protection to low-income jobseekers, without reducing incentives to work or search for jobs that arise when the economy rebounds.

Finally, within the framework of the ongoing MOSS-NCW-ILO partnership, 'Upscale Get Ahead and Financial Education Trainings', priority and further support could be given during the selection process to women who have been directly or indirectly affected by the COVID-19 outbreak, also with special focus on women in agriculture.

Promoting data and knowledge for gender-responsive policymaking

An important point to highlight in the Government's response to the COVID-19 has been its efforts to ensure that MoHP collects and issues sex, age and disability-disaggregated data on the spread of coronavirus, including tracking the emergency response in order to recognize differences in exposure and treatment, to help design preventive measures. Through its policy paper, gender response tracker and Observatory, the NCW is also providing evidence-based policy advice to support gender-responsive policies in the face of COVID-19 outbreak to the Government. It is also working with various government partners to support the development and implementation of mitigation and response policies to ensure the protection of women and girls, both on the immediate and medium-term responses.

In line with the need to support knowledge, policy research and social innovation to design new programmes to support women and to identify opportunities, the NCW has called for additional support for Egypt's National Observatory for Women, to identify information gaps and to

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design, collect and disseminate indicators to be used in the short-term and the medium-term for monitoring and evaluating the impact of the pandemic. The NCW also calls for regular public opinion surveys to determine the economic, social and psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Egyptian women.

Conclusion

The Government of Egypt's response to the crisis occasioned by the measures needed to curb the COVID-19 pandemic have gone a long way to address the specific and differential needs of women, who have been impacted in several health, social and economic areas. In the health sector, it has endeavoured to ensure the continued supply of medicines and contraception, increase information and awareness and increased salaries for medical professionals, including interns and women doctors, in particular. To increase social protection, important measures include a significantly increase in the number of beneficiaries of conditional cash transfers from Takaful and Karama programmes (of which 80% of current recipients are women), the integration of elderly women in nursing homes in social protection, and an increase in pensions and social housing support.

In the realm of education, beyond increased efforts to shift to online learning, targeted efforts are needed to ensure that girls have equal and continued access to education, and do not dropout, and the related increased risk of early marriage to be addressed.

Responses have focused primarily on the economic realm, including increasing soft loans for microenterprise start-ups, the registration of casual workers (where women workers are largely concentrated) for one-off cash transfers, and protections from public-sector job cuts and special leave for pregnant women and working mothers. Notably, the Government's stimulus package provides more incentives for sectors that have high female labour force participation, such as agriculture and includes microfinance clients (women constitute over 70% of such clients) in the CBE's decision to delay loan instalments. The Government has also increased financial support for rural women leaders and made significant efforts to include women's needs in its COVID-19 response.

Moreover, the inclusion of the NCW in the new committee for workers affected by the economic impacts of COVID-19 reflects the State's belief in the importance of women's presence, representation and participation in the decision-making process and taking into account the needs of Egyptian women while designing policies and strategies to respond to and mitigate the impacts of the new coronavirus.

Many of the measures already undertaken are in line with recommendations issued by the NCW. However, a number of excellent recommendations have yet to be addressed. UN Women urges the Government of Egypt to broaden its already exemplary response to ensure that its response effectively reaches and integrates all women, particularly those most vulnerable, in line with the recommendations of the NCW's policy paper. UN Women appreciates the gender-sensitive approach taken by the Government of Egypt in its response to COVID-19 thus far and will continue to support national efforts to carry out additional measures in line with its responsibilities, which include advancing women's rights during such difficult times.