



The response should be systemic change, not retrogression

Women and ESCR Working Group Response to the COVID-19 Crisis April 2020

This briefing contains a summary of the analysis and key demands shaped by discussions and written contributions of members of the Women and ESCR Working Group.

COVID-19 has revealed a longstanding public health crisis, which is one aspect of a wider crisis of the dominant socio-economic model. This model has entailed systemic oppressions, commodification of health and care work, weakening of social protection, and fiscal austerity driven by neoliberal logics, undermining the realization of economic and social rights. Many government responses are not only prioritizing private interests over human rights, but also deepening historic inequalities and reinforcing intersecting oppressions. As stressed by Fundación Promoción Humana, “It shouldn’t be women who end up assuming the consequences of the crisis; this needs to become an opportunity for transformative change instead of a scenario of retrogression in the fulfillment of women’s rights”.

The pandemic doesn’t discriminate, but intersecting systems of oppression do. As emphasized by [APWLD](#), “Women of all diversities bear the brunt of this crisis as they face multiple and intersecting discrimination, exclusion and violence. The effect of this public health crisis leading to — and was brought by — the interconnected economic, social and political crisis is becoming clearly evident, and the most marginalized communities are hit the hardest.” Similarly, [AWID](#) has observed how “the coronavirus-related racism, xenophobia, ableism and discrimination has shed a light on how health pandemics are [...] ultimately a fight against culture and discriminatory systems.” Women also face higher risk of infection with COVID-19 due to being disproportionately represented among healthcare workers and/or in performing unpaid care work.

Gaps in social protection systems have translated into intensified care burdens for women, deepening the already unfair social distribution of unpaid care work, reinforcing patriarchal norms and increasing domestic violence. When states apply cuts to public services to redirect resources to address the pandemic, women's unpaid work increases. Neoliberal capitalism has failed to deliver peoples’ basic needs, including access to quality public healthcare and universal social protection; as [IWRAW-AP](#) suggests, “Health services, compromised already in many countries by the austerity recommendations of international financial institutions, are under



remarkable strain.” School closures and social isolation measures are revealing “the absence of adequate support for care services” and reinforcing “patriarchal, gendered norms of unpaid care work,” as many public goods and services have been “a target of ‘profit making’ and subsequently privatized” via IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programs, as stressed by APWLD. In turn, IWRAW-AP notes, “There is recognition of what kind of work really matters, the work that has been always given for granted.” Many members have also highlighted increased incidents of domestic violence and challenges in seeking remedy amid social isolation measures, as well as violence and harassment against women working in the healthcare sector.

Government responses have focused “saving the economy” and aiding businesses, at the expense of workers and communities, as stressed by United Sisterhood. Similarly, UTRASD argues, “Once such crises happen, it very quickly becomes obvious who is excluded from government help packages and assistance, as measures are taken for corporations and other privileged sectors while others, such as poor women, are marginalized.” In Colombia, as stressed by Comité Ambiental, the government is undermining free, prior and informed consent and issuing environmental licenses for extractives projects. Likewise, the already unsustainable sovereign debts of poor countries are substantially increasing, which will further tighten austerity measures with negative impacts in states’ ability to expand social protection and fulfill women’s economic, social and cultural rights.

Disproportionately represented in the informal sector and occupations with high levels of precariousness, often excluded from social protections schemes, women workers have experienced loss of jobs and livelihood. Many women in the informal economy are currently without any income. Their already difficult position in the world of work has worsened due to the public health emergency and how governments are addressing it. Domestic workers in Colombia, mainly black, displaced women, heads of family, and elderly women, have seen their already precarious working conditions either worsened or “have lost their jobs or are not receiving any income while they continue to work, which has left them without access to public services, housing, food for them and their families, and no access to healthcare,” as emphasized by [UTRASD](#). KHRC has highlighted how around 30.000 temporary workers in Kenya, mostly women, have lost their jobs, informal workers (80% of workers) have been deprived of any income, and the closure of flower exports has affected more than 2 million women. In this regard, AWAJ Foundation argues, “Multinationals and suppliers have to be pressured because women workers are not receiving any salary or protection. Workers are uncertain regarding how many months it will be until the markets for which they are producing stabilize.” Likewise, DWRC has described how in Palestine, many female workers in the public or private educational sector had to leave their jobs given schools closures and salary cuts, or continue to work online with their



students in spite of not receiving any salary, aggravated by the absence of a social insurances. In Jordan, as noted by [Tamkeen](#), women agricultural workers are unable to secure their basic needs and are excluded from the umbrella of Social Security, in a context in which the climate crisis has affected the harvesting process of crops; daily workers are being deprived from their work and are unable to secure the livelihoods of their families.

Governmental responses are undermining women’s right to livelihood, food, water and housing. Many governments have determined the closure of open-air markets as well as the banning of fishing or hunting in the commons, which implies a loss for communities’ livelihoods. In Pakistan, “fishing boats are also not allowed to go for fishing while fishing communities totally depend on fishing, which affects women the most,” as stressed by PFF. As stressed by [FIAN](#) “access to adequate food has been restricted by virtue of prioritizing supermarket chains over local markets and local cooperatives as food distributors”. The cost of food has highly increased, and conditions are favorable for speculation, which prevent women from providing for themselves and their families. In the Philippines, Samahan suggests, “after the work suspension and lockdown of the whole Luzon island, food assistance from the government is barely seen in communities, leaving women and their families hungry and with no assurance that additional assistance will be distributed to the communities at a regular basis”. Furthermore, forced evictions continue to happen in the context of this emergency, and the lack of access to quality public services creates more risks for impoverished women and their families and even more for those living in informal settlements. As described by Abahlali baseMjondolo in South Africa, despite the official banning of evictions during the lockdown, the eThekweni Municipality has repeatedly attacked shack dwellers, , including incidents of sexual harassment and assault, leading them to ask, “How are we going to be indoors while our houses are being demolished?” In addition, and as stressed by Samahan, in many countries “deepening hunger and extreme poverty are aggravated by oppressive measures.”

Alternatives are emerging from indigenous peoples, peasants, fisherfolks and other communities, drawing on their traditional knowledge and care networks. As communities in countries as diverse as Honduras, Germany, the Philippines, Austria, Kenya and Guatemala, face hunger and evictions amid government restrictions and private profiteering, these grassroots alternatives—often led by women—are vital for short-term survival but also offer important models capable of advancing environmental and human rights. For instance, indigenous communities in Guatemala are bartering goods and consuming local products, as described by Consejo de Pueblos Whuxtaj. In Honduras, Garifuna communities have created healthcare focal points, community healthcare protocols and are using their traditional knowledge to protect their communities, as highlighted by OFRANEH.



As stressed by APWLD, “The current crisis is a reminder to the long-fought demands of feminist and peoples’ movements for Development Justice and an opportunity to realize the elimination of wealth, power and resources inequalities between countries, between rich and poor and between men and women”. The following are our immediate and long-term demands:

Immediate demands

- **Women in the frontline of this public-health struggle need to be protected as the most-exposed to the pandemic**, including those serving in the healthcare sector and those providing care in their homes to infected relatives, including but not limited to ensuring their access to protection equipment.
- **Women at risk of forced evictions, in informal economy and vulnerable sectors, must be urgently protected, and their rights to food, housing and health must be fulfilled.** “Not all women can stay in isolation when housing, food, living-wages, social protection are not universally fulfilled rights” (KHRC). **Governments should adopt direct compensation measures, as universal basic incomes, for informal workers and other sectors most affected by the pandemic.**
- **Ensure an intersectional analysis and approach in all responses, taking targeted measures to meet specific needs of women and girls, and making sure they effectively benefit from assistance.** “The responses must be formulated with the aim to reduce inequalities, redistribute wealth and achieve human rights. For that, structural change is undoubtedly crucial” (APWLD). **An intersectional approach must also be adopted in medium and long-term efforts.**
- **Ensure availability of disaggregated data**, including by gender, in relation to rates of infection, economic impacts, unpaid care work, barriers of access to care for women, incidence of domestic and sexual violence against women, among others. “States must monitor intersectional impacts of the measures taken and adapt accordingly to protect women with intersecting identities and certain communities from disproportional impacts” (CAOI).
- **Women and communities’ participation in decision-making in the current public-health emergency is vital, especially from the most impacted groups of women.** States must create enabling conditions to ensure their access to information and effective participation in shaping and implementing response measures, and in national budgeting processes, especially when urgent fiscal policies are made to respond to this COVID-19 crisis. Develop direct consultation with grassroots women leaders and feminist organizations.
- **Adopt urgent measures to stop the rise of domestic violence** against women and girls and femicides taking place in the current context, including by ensuring the continuity of essential services and access to justice. Special attention needs to be given to militarized contexts and rural areas. Actions might include strengthening the capacity of women’s organizations to provide support.



- **Adopt measures to recognize, reduce and redistribute the overload of unpaid care work** for families and particularly women. Likewise, family-work conciliation measures must be adopted.
- **The IMF and other financial institutions must cancel all debts for low and moderate income countries.** In the current crisis, the world's poorest countries need to be able to mobilize maximum available resources to provide for the health and wellbeing of women and other affected groups.
- **Community-based response and networks must be respected and supported.** As indigenous, peasant, and other communities develop their own protocols and strategies to isolate the virus, their initiatives must be strengthened while their access to quality public services is ensured.
- **Governments must ensure that people are privileged over profit in the current crisis.** License processes to advance environmental projects must be stopped until conditions are appropriate to fulfill free, prior and informed consent. Labor rights must be protected.

Structural demands:

- **Recovery efforts must advance women's rights and substantive equality. We won't accept a retrogression in the gains we have had in our feminist struggles for women's rights.** Under the current economic system, the "normal" for women has been discrimination, exploitation and violence, in particular for women with intersecting identities and in the informal economy. Transformative change needs to happen in order to overcome systemic inequalities revealed by the current public health crisis. "It's vital focusing not only on how to address the current emergency, but also on the day after and how to question and challenge structural dynamics of oppression" (GI-ESCR).
- **Governments must respect, protect and fulfill human rights to healthcare and social protection for all women,** including unpaid care and informal workers. "Social Protection floors and universal basic income might be the answer for women in the informal economy and those sectors not covered by the umbrella of social protection" (UTRASD).
- **Care is a universal need that must be fulfilled as a right.** Universal systems for public provision of care must be created and strengthened; care work must be recognized and fairly distributed.
- **Feminist alternatives must be put at the center of recovery efforts, working towards systemic change.** "This is the time to examine alternative policies which reimagine bold and innovative ways to organise our societies" (GI-ESCR). "Feminist movements have already been sharing alternative visions for decades, based on human rights principles of equality, non-discrimination and respect for the planet" (IWRAP-AP).