

Gender and COVID-19:

UN-Habitat

Existing social inequalities facing women and girls living in urban areas are likely to be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As national and local governments impose lockdowns and restrictions on movement outside the home, women in domestic violence situations are being forced to stay at home with their abusers. Meanwhile the support services for survivors have been disrupted or rendered inaccessible. The immediate economic hardship and psychological anxiety caused by the pandemic can trigger domestic violence where it was not already present.

Governments must emphasize rigorous protection for and safeguarding of women and girls from gender-based violence. National response plans must prioritize support for women by implementing effective measures such as working with civil society groups to designate domestic violence shelters for survivors of sexual abuse and gender-based violence as “essential” services that must remain open even during lockdowns.

Outside the home, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that women’s economic and productive lives will be affected disproportionately and in different ways from men.

Women represent 70 per cent of the health and social sector workforce globally and special attention should be given to how the work environment may expose them to discrimination as frontline health workers.

Beyond the health sector, women make up the majority of frontline workers such as food vendors and childcare providers. These are often low-paid jobs at high risk of exposure. Women entrepreneurs may be disproportionately affected if they are unable to access relief funds or capital in the current crisis as easily as male counterparts. Girls and young women facing severe economic shocks are more likely to take on high-risk work in order to ensure their economic survival.

As national and local governments prepare their economic and social relief plans, all policies and programmes should mainstream gender in order to lessen the detrimental effects of this pandemic and minimize the further expansion of gender-based inequalities. In the face of expected public budget cuts due to the impending global recession, governments should engage in gender-responsive budgeting when making key decisions.

Women might be more at risk of contracting COVID-19 from public transport as they rely on it more than men to travel to work, visit a doctor or shop. At the same time, public transport has been reduced or even shut down in some areas and prices have increased.

Special attention and outreach need to be given to women living in vulnerable situations such as in informal settlements, including women with disabilities and older women who are risk of suffering from more severe symptoms if they contract COVID-19.

Women and girls' voices need to be heard in decision-making processes for outbreak preparedness and response. There is inadequate women's representation in national and global COVID-19 policy conversations.

COVID-19 response and recovery should include data collection initiatives. Authorities need to ensure sex-disaggregated data collection on the effects of the virus, such as economic impacts, care burden, incidents of sexual violence and abuse, and crisis recovery at all levels of governance. This can provide information on how and why pandemics such as COVID-19 may result in an increase in violence against women, identify the risk factors and examine the availability of services for women survivors of violence.

The COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity to challenge the unequal gender status quo and build back with gender-responsive resilience. The "new normal" should include safe public spaces, strong urban planning, access to water, sanitation and hygiene, better transport systems and adequate housing.