

COVID-19 and increase in gender based violence and discrimination against women

Joint call by the EDVAW Platform of independent United Nations and regional expert mechanisms on violence against women and women's rights on combating the pandemic of gender based violence against women during the COVID-19 crisis.

GENEVA (XX July 2020) – In the context of the current global Covid-19 pandemic ***the EDVAW Platform of 7 independent United Nations and regional expert mechanisms on violence against women and women's rights**** jointly call upon all States and relevant stakeholders worldwide to take urgent steps to combat the global pandemic of gender based violence against women with particular focus on domestic violence, by ensuring 'Peace at home' during lockdown and integrating the elimination of discrimination and gender based violence against women in the COVID 19 recovery phase and beyond.

The extraordinary measures adopted by national governments around the world in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed glaring political, social and economic inequalities that continue to pervade many societies. Over recent months it has become clear that women and girls have been disproportionately impacted by these inequalities, with lockdown measures highlighting pre-existing gaps and exacerbating deep rooted gender based discrimination and violence.

With many countries reporting dramatic increases in cases of domestic violence, including intimate partner violence and sexual abuse, as a result of complying with social confinement measures, the home has become a place of fear for many women and children, with restrictions of movement, financial constraints and generalized uncertainty emboldening perpetrators and providing them with additional power and control. Fewer police interventions; the closure of courts and limited access to legal assistance, to counseling and other emergency services, such as alternative housing; the closure of shelters and services for victims have aggravated the risks faced by women and girls. Femicides by intimate partners are also being reported with alarming frequency. Some States have reported that there has been neither an increase nor decrease in cases of gender based violence, indicating that in order to properly measure the extent of violence, comparable data on all forms of gender based violence and femicide is essential.

The ever increasing domestic responsibilities including caring for children, the elderly and other dependent family members, as well as providing for basic needs of family life such as food, hygiene and education, are taking an additional toll on both the physical and mental wellbeing of women worldwide. In the framework of the pandemic, attention also needs to be paid to the possible longer-term effects on the balance between professional and personal life and on women's economic independence. The loss of income and reduction of economic activity is an additional factor to the rise in the inequality and poverty levels, especially affecting women, particularly women heads of households, as well as female workers in the informal economy, domestic workers, rural women and women in prostitution.

With women disproportionately occupying frontline roles that provide crucial medical care and other essential services, they are being placed at increased risk of contracting the virus. Restrictions on the provision of health services to women and girls, such as pre and post-natal care, termination of pregnancy and the availability of contraceptives, imposed in many countries to address the excessive demands on health services caused by the pandemic, adversely affect women and girls.

Other registered challenges include closure of schools, leading to increased risk of sexual exploitation, early pregnancies, rape, as well as early and forced marriages and female genital mutilation, as millions of girls are being kept at home. Another extremely worrying trend in the context of domestic confinement and the decrease in the amount of people circulating on the streets, is that acts of sexual violence and rape against women and girls have also increased.

There are also concerns that restrictive measures can lead to compounded and intersectional forms of discrimination against women belonging to disadvantaged and marginalized groups including, but not limited to, women and girls from minorities, indigenous, afro-descendant, migrant and rural communities, older women, women and girls with disabilities, homeless women, women deprived of liberty and victims of trafficking, who are particularly affected by the crisis.

Despite the disproportionate negative effects of the crisis on women, as well as their critical role in keeping communities running, they are largely absent from local, national and global COVID-19 response teams, policy spaces and decision-making. In the absence of gender sensitive intersectional responses, different forms of systemic discrimination already faced by women and girls will be exacerbated.

2020 was expected to be a year for reviewing achievements and accelerating progress on gender equality after 25 years of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and 20 years since UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. There is now concern that COVID-19 and its impact will push back fragile progress on gender equality. However, we must not lose sight of the gains we have achieved over recent years, and should take heart from the immediate and positive response and commitment from some 146 Member States to the UN Secretary-General's global appeal for 'peace in the home' in April, building on the earlier appeal for a global ceasefire and an 'end to all violence everywhere', as well as States commitment to the Declaration of the Committee of the Parties to the Istanbul Convention, among others. The response represents much needed political will in the current context to address discrimination and violence against women, and any response to the crisis should be considered as an opportunity to recognize and reinforce the efforts that have already been made in promoting and protecting the rights of women in all spheres of life, and to 'build back better'.

While recognising the challenges faced by States in containing the pandemic, as well as the importance of the guidelines for confinement and social distancing, we call upon States

to take a gender sensitive intersectional approach in their responses to COVID-19 and implement the following key measures:

- Ensure the full participation of women and girls in all crisis response and recovery plans.
- Adapt political and legislative measures that have been issued to tackle the pandemic to the needs of women and girls, considering the multiple structural factors that perpetuate discrimination against women and girls and increase their risk in this context, such as economic precariousness, age, migrant status, disability status, deprivation of liberty, ethnic-racial origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, among others.
- Include the prevention and redress of violence against women as a key part of national response plans for COVID-19 on the basis of a coordinated response of all actors, with due recognition of and support for the vital role of women's support services and NGOs in the support and protection of victims.
- Ensure continued and safe access to support services and emergency measures, including legal assistance and access to judicial remedies for women and girls at risk, or who are subjected to, domestic and sexual violence, harassment and abuse.
- Develop care protocols and strengthen the capacity of security agents and justice actors involved in the investigation and sanction of acts of domestic violence, as well as carrying out the distribution of guidance materials to all state institutions.
- Ensure that COVID-19 response and post-crisis recovery plans promote women's economic empowerment and address gender inequalities in employment and social protection systems.
- Significantly overhaul and expand social protection systems to take into account women's specific needs and vulnerabilities including, but not limited to, paid sick leave, increased support for child and elderly care, housing and food subsidies.
- Ensure access to sexual and reproductive health services through easy-to-access procedures such as online prescriptions for contraceptives; ensuring continuous education through accessible educational tools.
- Facilitate the issuance of protection orders and ensure access to rape crisis centers and safe shelters or hotel accommodation for women and girls who are victims or at risk of gender-based violence.
- Protect female health and social work professionals, and all those women who are working in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Specific attention should be paid to women and girls from marginalized groups and their specific needs in terms of accessibility and adequacy of information about the pandemic, the ability to maintain social distance, and access to testing and treatment as well as other necessities including food, housing, sanitation and essential support services.
- Systematically gather disaggregated outbreak-related data, to examine and report on the gender-specific health effects of COVID-19, both direct and indirect as well as on the gender-specific human rights impacts of COVID-19 and utilize this data in the formulation of responses.

ENDS

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