

## SI Position Paper - COVID-19 and Gender Inequality

### Where Things Stand...

The UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres summed up many of the basic issues related to gender inequality exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic in his Nelson Mandela *Annual Lecture 2020 speech* in July 2020.

*“Everywhere, women are worse off than men, simply because they are women. Inequality and discrimination are the norm. Violence against women, including femicide, is at epidemic levels. Globally, women are still excluded from senior positions in governments and on corporate boards. Fewer than one in ten world leaders is a woman [...] The economic fallout of the pandemic is affecting those who work in the informal economy; small and medium-size businesses; and people with caring responsibilities, who are mainly women [...]*

*Gender inequality harms everyone because it prevents us from benefitting from the intelligence and experience of all of humanity. “*

At the UN General Assembly in September 2020, 162 Member States adopted a Resolution on the COVID-19 pandemic. Within that resolution they called *“upon Member States to adopt measures to recognise, reduce and redistribute women’s and girl’s disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work and the feminisation of poverty, which is exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, including through poverty eradication measures, labour policies, public services and gender-responsive public protection programmes;”*

Increasing evidence shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on women and girls throughout the world in all aspects of life including:

#### Education

- Girls who have been out of school for a long period of time are less likely to return than boys, thus losing their education and future prospects.

The UN Sustainable Goals Report 2020 provides extensive information on the impact of the closure of schools. Despite progress, the world is not on track to meet 2030 education targets. Before the coronavirus crisis, projections showed that more than 200 million children would be out of school, and only 60 per cent of young people would be completing upper secondary education in 2030.

School closures to stop the spread of COVID-19 are having an adverse impact on learning outcomes and social and behavioural development of children and youth. They have affected over 90% of the world’s student population—1.6 billion children and youth.

Many schools are offering remote learning to students through virtual classrooms to mitigate the impact of school closures. While this is an option for some, it is out of reach for many. Many students, children and youth in vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, such as those living in remote areas, extreme poverty, fragile states and refugee camps, do not have access to technology to allow them to attend. Although distance learning solutions are provided in four out of five countries with school closures, at least 500 million children and youth are currently excluded from these options. Lack of access to computers and the internet at home, as well as a low level of computer-related skills, put many already marginalized students at a further disadvantage. The digital divide will widen existing education equality gaps.

- The care and home schooling of children out of school has fallen mainly on women/mothers

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Prior to COVID 19, in an average day, women spend about three times as many hours in unpaid domestic and care work as men, according to the latest data from 89 countries and areas between 2001 and 2018. During the pandemic, women are likely to take on most additional care work owing to the closure of schools and day-care centres. School and daycare closures require parents, especially women, to care more for children and facilitate their learning at home. Often mothers do not have the levels of education sufficient to assist their children nor do they have knowledge of or access to the technology.

#### Violence Against Women and Girls

- Gender based violence has been reported from many countries as having increased with many incidents related to women's responsibility for the collection of water or to their need to defecate in open spaces.
- Growing evidence from women's aid organisations as well as police services show that there has been a major increase in domestic violence and abuse.
- Other forms of violence against women and girls is beginning to increase, such as forced and child marriage.

It is stated in the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women reporting to the UN in July 2020:

*"The intersection between the COVID-19 pandemic, and its lockdown measures, and the pandemic of violence against women, has exposed pre-existing gaps and shortcomings in the prevention of violence against women as a human rights violation that had not been sufficiently addressed by many States even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Measures to combat COVID-19 have mostly been gender-blind with many States failing to consider measures to combat gender-based violence against women as essential services and as basic human rights that should not be restricted. A combination of such factors has resulted in the fact that lockdown measures imposed to contain the COVID-19 pandemic increased the risk of gender-based violence against women, especially domestic violence."*

#### Health Services

- Women's health services, especially pre and post-maternal, care have been reduced in many places as all focus has been on treating coronavirus patients and resources frequently diverted to deal with the pandemic patients.

A rapid review of 25 essential services carried out by the WHO in May 2020 uncovered serious disruptions to essential health services across the world. "Routine immunization and supplementary measles and rubella campaigns were significantly disrupted. Services for non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart diseases, and cancer, have been significantly affected."

- The majority of health and care workers are women and they have been placed at risk in the frontline.

Globally, women make up three quarters of medical doctors and nursing personnel and are also on the front lines in fighting the coronavirus, since women account for nearly 70 per cent of health and social workers globally. (UN SG SDG Report 2020)

- Lack of water, sanitation, soap, and menstrual products impose stronger challenges on women and girls than men.

Probably one of the most critical areas for fighting the corona virus, 3 billion people worldwide still lack basic handwashing facilities at home which is the most effective method for COVID-19 prevention. The coronavirus crisis has brought to the forefront the critical importance of water, sanitation and hygiene for protecting human health. Despite progress, billions of people across the globe still lack these basic services. In addition, preliminary estimates from 79 mostly high- and high-middle-income countries in 2019 suggest that, in about one quarter of the countries, less than half of all household wastewater flows are safely treated. (UN SG's Report on SDGs July 2020)

- Many women who have been isolated suffer deteriorating mental health particularly older women and young mothers.

Recent reports demonstrate that young people are feeling the consequences of the pandemic. The International Labour Organization's (ILO) [Youth and COVID-19: impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being](#) report states that 42 per cent of those who have continued to work have seen their incomes reduced, affecting their mental well-being. The survey found that half of all young people have been feeling some degree of anxiety or depression during the pandemic.

Older women, especially those living alone, find it increasingly difficult to manage everyday life as the pandemic grips a neighbourhood, thus causing high levels of anxiety. Women in rural areas find it difficult to access care and health services adding to that anxiety.

#### Food Security

- Access to food and other household supplies hit women hardest especially in cultures which dictate that they eat after the men and children.

Eradicating hunger and achieving food security remains a challenge, more so in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. Food insecurity was already on the rise and the population affected by moderate or severe food insecurity went from 22.4% in 2014 to 25.9% in 2019. The estimates for 2016–2019 also indicated that food insecurity was higher among adult women than men in every region. At the global level the total number of people suffering from severe food insecurity has been on the rise since 2015 and there are still millions of malnourished children.

Along with conflict, climate shocks and the locust crisis, COVID-19 poses an additional threat to food systems, indirectly reducing purchasing power and the capacity to produce and distribute food, which affects the most vulnerable populations. In 2020, up to 132 million more people may suffer from undernourishment because of COVID-19.

#### Economic Empowerment

- The majority of employment in the hospitality, tourist, personal care, retail and service industries are held by women and are affected immediately and long term by protective measures reducing income and opportunity for women.
- For many of these sectors jobs are likely to be lost permanently thus reducing employment opportunities for women.

The COVID-19 pandemic has abruptly and profoundly disrupted the global economy, pushing the world into a recession. The unprecedented shock to the world's labour markets is expected to result in a drop of around 10.5% in aggregate working hours in the second quarter of 2020, equivalent to 305 million full-time workers. According to estimates from the International Labour Organisation, global working hours could drop by 14 per cent in the second quarter of 2020. This is equivalent to

approximately 400 million full-time workers doing a 48-hour work week. Small and medium enterprises, workers in informal employment, the self-employed, daily wage earners, and workers in sectors at highest risk of disruption are hit the hardest. The largest group to be economically affected are women, since they make up the majority of workers in the hardest hit sectors.

### Technology

- The gender digital divide more greatly impacts women who are the least likely to have access to mobile technology or any type of computer.

With COVID-19 forcing many to work, learn, seek health-care and socialise from home, digital technologies and internet connectivity have never been more a part of our daily lives. To access the internet, mobile connections provide flexibility, particularly in places where broadband service is unavailable or unaffordable. Coverage of mobile access has expanded rapidly. In 2019, almost the entire world population (97% / (96.5% Sec Gen report.)) lived within reach of a mobile cellular signal, and 93% lived within reach of a mobile-broadband signal. Least developed countries have seen significant growth in coverage of mobile-broadband signals, from 51% in 2015 to 79% in 2019. However, just 54% of the global population actually use the internet. Most of the offline population live in LDCs, where only 19% use the internet, compared with 87% in developed countries. Key reasons for this large gap are the cost of using the internet and the lack of necessary skills.

In March 2020, [a report by the OECD](#) found, “roughly 327 million fewer women than men have a smartphone and can access mobile internet. Women are on average 26 percent less likely than men to have a smartphone. In South Asia and Africa these proportions stand at 70 percent and 34 percent, respectively.”

### Data collection and monitoring

- Gender disaggregated data is not being collected so impact and targeted funding for specific groups including women and girls is difficult to assess.

While the need for sound data continues to escalate, poorer countries lack the resources to produce them. From 2016 to 2017, ODA for data and statistics rose by 11 per cent, from \$623 million to \$690 million, but this was only 0.34 per cent of total ODA. International funding for data and statistics is about half the level it needs to be. Over the past three years, countries in Sub-Saharan Africa benefited most, receiving \$885 million, a significant increase in funding. Continued and increased technical and financial support is needed to ensure that countries in developing regions are better equipped to monitor progress of their national development agendas.

In 2019, most countries reported that they were carrying out a national statistical plan (141 countries, up from 129 in 2018). However, many also said that they lacked sufficient funding for full implementation. Only 25% of plans were fully funded in Sub-Saharan Africa (9 out of 36 countries), compared with 95% (36 out of 38 countries) in Europe and Northern America.

International funding for data and statistics which is essential to combat COVID-19 or any other pandemic was 690 million in 2017, only half the level it needed to be. Much of the information related to the pandemic is considered as an under-reporting or under-estimate as basic data for monitoring is not considered accurate or is inconsistent in collection.

### Leadership and Decision Making

- Women are not included in leadership and decision making on dealing with this pandemic although so many play major parts in front line roles.

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Given that most of the decisions related to the pandemic both nationally and locally are being taken by political representatives there is a lack of recognition and understanding of much of the impact on women and girls. Women are underrepresented at all levels of representation from local community leadership to national Prime Ministerial positions. There is some evidence to suggest that female leaders have dealt with the outbreak in their countries most efficiently and effectively. A recent policy briefing from UN Women shows that whilst women are leading in frontline response, they are missing from political decision making.

All of the above is magnified when women and girls from disadvantaged and vulnerable groups are considered.

It is to be recognised that certain groups across a population are affected more dramatically than others by COVID-19, for example currently there are a greater number of deaths being recorded for men than for women, with some racial groups showing higher mortality rates.

It is inevitable that the research on any of the above will be ongoing for years to come but so far the research indicates in all of the above situations that women and girls are feeling the societal consequences which may put back their fight for gender equality for many years unless the future is Built Back Better.

### **...And Where Things Need to Go**

Overall recognition should be given to the impact on different groups of people with research providing back up evidence. Long term implications and consequences need to be part of any proposals for future development. Continued detailed research globally and for individual countries will be necessary to provide a sound basis for responses at all levels in the future.

UN Secretary General Guterres summed it up neatly “*A New Social Contract within societies will enable young people to live in dignity; will ensure women have the same prospects and opportunities as men; and will protect the sick, the vulnerable, and minorities of all kinds. [...]*”

*And we will “need affirmative action programmes and targeted policies to address and redress historic inequalities in gender (race or ethnicity) that have been reinforced by social norms. “*

### **Fundamental Action**

Member States are urged to

- Maximise Public Health information, provide and enforce all necessary preventative measures to ensure the virus is contained;
- Ensure universal access to a vaccine when available, supported by all treatments free or at accessible cost levels;
- Provide universal access to basic health care including maternal care;
- Increase access to water and sanitation to assist in prevention measures;
- Put in place social protection measures which will support women and families who have lost their livelihoods or had none previously including universal basic income;

- Collect gender disaggregated data so support can be focussed especially for women and girls where required;
- Include women in all discussions and decision-making on tackling the virus as well as on measures to move forward;
- Develop a society which is free from all forms of violence and abuse, especially those affecting women and girls. That means legal, political, economic, and cultural systems that work to end violence and abuse against women and children, educating men and boys.

#### **Additional Action**

- Enable civil society organisations to undertake activities and provide services which support the most disadvantaged by providing resources for them to carry out this work on the ground especially during the periods of greatest stress on public services.
- Enable access to digital services for all, especially those in education and training.
- Ensure accurate and verified gender and other vulnerable group disaggregated data is collected and made freely available.

#### **Where Soroptimist International Stands:**

These are the principles that Soroptimist International strongly supports and will advocate for on behalf of Women and Girls:

- Ensure that future rebuilding of services is based through participation and collaboration on protecting human rights and delivering an effective humanitarian response for all addressing the disproportionate and accumulative health and socio-economic impacts of Covid-19 on women, Black and ethnic minority people, disabled people, older people, and others hit hardest by it.
- Enabling women and girls to have a leadership voice in their communities, locally nationally and globally to build relevant and effective new services and improved structures.

Soroptimist International supports the implementation of the 2030 Agenda through its Federations, Unions, Regions, Clubs, by working on the ground with partner organisations and UN agencies to Educate, Empower and Enable women and girls everywhere.

#### **Resources/Sources**

This paper is intended to give a broad overview. Further papers on specific areas of Soroptimist work and the impact of COVID-19 will be issued in the future.

There are extensive UN and other documents available to support all of the above topics and more.

Check out the library of resources on the SI Lab.

UN Women produce regular briefings on all aspects of the impact of COVID & Women.

WHO produce regular briefings though not always related to women only.

Human Rights Commission have produced briefings on the impact on women's human rights.

Many NGOs are publishing papers based on their own experience in specific areas.

Sources used above include:

UN Sustainable Goals Report to HLPF July 2020

<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/>

Nelson Mandela Lecture by UN Secretary General Antonio Gueterres 2020

<https://www.nelsonmandela.org/content/page/annual-lecture-2020>

UN General Assembly 2020

<https://research.un.org/en/docs/ga/quick/regular/75>

<https://www.un.org/en/ga/74/resolutions.shtml>

specifically look for A/RES/74/306 in the 74 resolutions list.