

# Covid-19 Recovery & The Vitality of International Women Organisations

Gender-Inclusive Recovery Response: An Urgent Needs Assessment

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## ***Abstract***

*This report serves as a tool to highlight the vital roles that Women Organisations all over the world are playing in the mitigation and recovery response to Covid-19 despite not being involved in the early crisis assessment or resource allocation efforts conducted so far. The report makes recommendations to influence decision-making that may ensure that the inclusivity is an integral part of the ongoing [Inclusive] Covid-19 Recovery Response (ICRR) for jointly motivated engagement and future action.*



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# Introduction

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All time frontline warriors are left alone in times of crisis as the last recipients of recognition.

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The recent outbreak of the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) has led to a major reshuffling of global priorities with many major issues being placed aside. While the International Community's response has been swift, there are still many aspects which have yet to be addressed.

One of these aspects is being exacerbated by the pre-existing gaps in communities across the world, namely the gender-gap. With many nations leaning towards an inward isolationist approach, nationalism is becoming more prominent leading to a division of society and a fragility of inclusivity in a time of crisis which in turn has led to a backlash against gender-equality, as it is forced to take a back seat. This only reaffirms the need for more resilience.

In the first wave of response to the Covid-19 crisis, there was a noticeable lack of needs-based analysis from a gender perspective which in turn meant that there was both very little consideration towards gender-inclusive crisis response and women's organisations, and no justification for resource allocation. The situation for these organisations is made worse by the fact that, with no emergency funds, they possess no buffer to deal with the impact of the crisis or to continue supporting their communities. When left out of the emergency response, it is feared that the critical work that women organisations carry out is made redundant by sheer lack of acknowledgement.

Crisis specific funding to the UN and large international organisations would have a broader impact if the global community of women organisations were engaged by a universal

principle of inclusivity of organisations. The scope of UN funding recently made available remains limited to only a few countries, creating barriers for women organisations to participate fully in Covid-19 recovery response efforts.

**The provision of resources to local communities through major international WOs is a vital instrument in dealing with the crisis and lifting up the morale of the communities.** It is believed that the impact of emergency-driven funds, such as financial and social support provided to large organisations, would be amplified if the impressive and wide networking range of women organisations would be systematically and strategically included in the Covid-19 Response plans.

In order to further strengthen the Covid-19 Recovery Response, this report suggests to immediately engage women's organisations, which are at present being overlooked and sidelined. **In the current climate, inclusion remains strictly limited to the role that gender plays in already funded big non-gender focussed organisations.** As a consequence, the gender mandate being dominated by various agendas, women organisations have become faceless and the role of women has been undermined.

From the perspective of gender and women's organisations, an urgent action is needed to engage and include *women to women* networks, local and international partners and other Civil Society organisations. The specialised organisations need the recognition to reach out and connect. **It is vital that the International Community acknowledges the intrinsic need of a Gender-Inclusive Covid Recovery Response with local and international women organisations fully on board.**

## Areas of Impact

The process of the Covid-19 response and recovery demands a multitude of factors to take into consideration when determining the priorities of where it is best to offer time and resources. While so far the Global Response of the International Community has been timely in offering resources to various institutions, there are some areas, where interest seems to have been haphazardly analysed, ignoring, if not neglecting entirely, critical aspects of gender differences and approach.

As stated in the introduction, an inclusive approach is required to have a successful and lasting impact.

With this perspective, the report highlights six areas of interest where a gender-inclusive response must be incorporated and support for women's organisations cannot be under-represented.





## Disaster & Crisis Management

The Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) is a joint initiative by the European Commission, the United Nations Development Group, and the World Bank together with GFDRR which outlines extensive guidelines on the immediate assessment of post-disaster needs, allowing for a comprehensive and inclusive approach towards understanding the needs of the affected population and government response. Moreover, such an exercise **includes gender as one of its cross-cutting issues together with environment, governance, human rights, and HIV**. Additionally, a gender perspective within the assessment is seen as important in order to include the needs of the most vulnerable, such as female-headed households, children, aged, youth, etc. This theoretical tool, however, should be implemented in a practical context to analyse its effectiveness and its conformity with the reality on the ground.

Despite the PDNA guidelines and several international treaties and obligations including the SDG Goal 5, and the Beijing Resolution,

raising awareness of the vulnerable position of women in conflict and disaster settings, the need to connect this international awareness with local initiatives and circumstances remains necessary. A lack of local engagement in these measures and especially the involvement of trusted, female channels drastically hinders the positive impact these agreements have.

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The aftermath of ‘Earthquake Pakistan’ in 2005 identified the lack of gender expertise during early Post-Disaster Needs Assessment efforts. This brought attention to the impact of resource allocation decisions and how this lack fundamentally affected the needs of the afflicted women and girls. ([Gender Concerns International](#)). **The current Covid-19 response needs gender-expertise on parity-level ensuring a participatory role for women organisations to lead the recovery efforts.**

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## Health Sector

The healthcare sector is inevitably the most affected with women healthcare professionals representing almost 70% of health personnel being placed at greater risk. In addition to the long hours and extra shifts, healthcare professionals are putting their lives in jeopardy with the risk of getting infected, not to mention infecting their loved ones. Indeed, a large number of healthcare professionals have already lost their lives due to the virus, creating serious shortages to the sector in both the short and long-term.

The loss of fellow colleagues during this high-pressure period severely impacts healthcare professionals, leading to prolonged psychological impacts, and increased stress and burnout rates. This phenomenon is largely caused by the lack of protective equipment for health personnel and the limited number of intensive-care units, depending on each country. An added complication is the necessity to simultaneously cope with patients of other diseases, ranging from chronic such as cancer to other type of medical emergencies,

including heart attacks. All women, especially mothers and pregnant women, are impacted by the lockdown, with the medical industry attempting to control the spread of Covid-19 by providing healthcare and medical diagnoses. However, this is a selective option to digitally connected communities and homes.

Digital healthcare is being adopted at a slower pace than anticipated in most countries with the exception of South Korea and Singapore, leading to unattended patients and a false representation of the number of patients in each country. Yet, the effective implementation of this project can be positive, marking the new age of digital transformation in the health sector.

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The lessons learnt from the response to the Ebola crisis observed that the involvement of women's organisations had a profound positive impact. The engagement of such organisations in Covid-19 response is bound to deliver an impressive outcome.

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## Economic Recovery Response

The global impact of Covid-19 is particularly severe in middle to low-income countries as a result of a lack of basic services and insurances. One of the factors impacted by this pandemic is economic participation, specifically regarding women in middle to low-income countries.

As women represent less than 40% of the labour force, yet 57% of part-time workers, they are often employed on a temporary basis and it is feared that they are immediately affected by layoffs and are the first to lose their jobs. More than half of the informal work is performed by women and in times of crisis, they are not protected via any benefits of a social safety net due to the lack of formal employment position.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) warns that up to 195 million people could lose their jobs due to the Covid-19 outbreak and that the most vulnerable groups include cleaners, service, and kitchen staff. Workers without social security and unemployment benefits could be severely affected as losing their job means losing their income which would be the case for millions of informal workers, often women.

Women organisations across the globe are setting up initiatives to respond to the need of their community. For example, whereas INSAF, an NGO in Morocco, took initiative to help single mothers get access to food after they lost their jobs, an Indian NGO launched the 'India fights Corona' campaign to help distribute hygiene products and help economically deprived families in need, and the 'We Love Yangon' charity in Myanmar is handing out meals to those who do not have access to it.

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The size of the impact of Covid-19 on the economy is unimaginable and calls for special, inclusive measures in order to combat a backlash in gender equity and to not repeat the patriarchal paradigm which has been predominant for centuries. **The rights of the female workforce need to be protected especially regarding equity principles and equal wages for healthcare professionals should prioritise an Inclusive Covid-19 Recovery Response (ICCR).**

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## Governance & Electoral Parity

The social distancing measures implemented in response to Covid-19 have wide ranging impacts on democratic elections. As restrictions are placed on free movement, resulting in the reduced ability of people to go to voting stations, government officials to campaign, and media outlets to report on issues outside the scope of the virus, it is the responsibility of the International Community and local governments to find appropriate alternative options to ensure that the legitimacy and integrity of democratic system is upheld. Around the world fragile democratic governments are moving towards authoritarianism. Such as the Hungarian Parliament passing a bill that granted the Prime Minister the power to rule indefinitely under the idea of emergency, cancelling future elections and imposing restrictions on the media and the movement of people. Similarly, the move made by the Polish President to use the virus as a way of promoting his campaign under the idea of ‘crisis management’, is worrying as other presidential candidates are forced to suspend their campaigns. The hinderance of the virus on the democratic participation of citizens therefore needs to be addressed immediately and with caution.

Ensuring an increase in women`s governance participation in gender electoral parity has long been the core focus of Gender Concerns International`s election support and international election observation work. Through its Gender Election Observation Mission ([GEOM](#)) Program tool, the pioneering work on Gender Electoral Parity has provided leadership and guidance to many National Elections Management Bodies (EMBS), fellow International and Domestic Election Observation Missions, Electoral System Experts, and partners in Women Human Rights and other Civil Society Organisations, globally. As authoritarianism rises at the face of Covid-19 Response and Recovery challenge, it is feared that women will be made the last to leave the confinement of their home to get back to employment and electoral participation.

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There is a need to demand for increased women`s political participation and an enhanced female leadership world-wide through electoral processes. The vigilance in such processes for Gender Electoral Parity has never been so central as it has become now in this phase of Covid-19 Response and Recovery.

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## Women Peace & Security

[UN Secretary General](#) Antonio Guterres launched a powerful appeal for a global ceasefire which received wider international support, yet this has not yet lightened any burden of communities affected by war and states afflicted by fragile peace and security situations, such as in Libya, Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Myanmar, the list goes on.

Further, making a bad situation worse, under the Covid-19 lockdown measures, the World-wide Community of UNSCR1325 is paralysed to offer continuation of its support to their partners. [Women Leaders have appealed UNSC](#) to call for a session to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on Women, Peace, and Security.

In addition to outside threats of violence, women are at risk of violence inside their homes. The frightening evidence of a rise in domestic violence has engulfed women across the globe. Reports from Europe show more women in Denmark seeking refuge in shelters, while domestic violence in France surged by 32%, and China reported a similar increase in cases, identifying only the tip of the iceberg. The rate of increase in domestic violence in developed countries has yet to reach what happens in urban slums and rural areas when lockdown measures

were implemented. The [Secretary General of the Council of Europe](#) has joined the WHO and UN Secretary General in a call for measures to protect women and children against domestic violence. These issues are one of the focus points of World-wide Women's and Civil Society Organisations and the aforementioned networks have demonstrated their concern over this situation. In Lebanon, women organisations are trying to talk to women and set up action plans, however, due to weak Wi-Fi connections such efforts are often hindered. Furthermore, Syrian refugees living in close proximity of each other with poor hygiene systems, cause serious concerns for women activists in Lebanon. If the virus were to spread, in such an environment the consequences would be dire.

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These examples highlight just how fundamental NGOs are in helping communities that are not reached by governmental or other organisations. Yet, at the moment when they are most needed, their potential for impact needs to be recognised and supported.

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## Environment & Climate Change

The Covid-19 pandemic is inherently connected to changes in the environment, consequently impacting women. As mentioned by the UNFCC, within days of the lockdowns as a result of the virus air quality improved in various global cities. However, the impact has not been positive for everyone and the long-term consequences of reduced global trade will not be beneficial for all, even though they would help the environment.

The UNFCC therefore calls for a multi-stakeholder platform, including local women, to analyse the trade-off that comes from helping the planet versus helping the people. They emphasise that the virus shows **that whilst humans have unlimited needs, the planet does not have unlimited resources.** Moreover, the impact is not equal for everyone. The European Environmental Feminists calls attention to the fact that women in the global South will be more heavily impacted, as due to Covid-19 energy poverty will increase and they will have less or no access to clean drinking water. Therefore, they urge the International Community to become aware that

the areas impacted by the virus are interlinked and that therefore the solutions have to be embedded in the 2030 Agenda to handle the challenges posed by climate change. A global network of women working on Environment stresses the **need for a collective response to the Covid-19 crisis involving governments, the UN, and NGOs to keep fighting against the interconnected crisis of gender injustice, the destruction of ecosystems, and climate change.**

In addition to environmental concerns surrounding the Covid-19 outbreak, the steps taken before these exceptional circumstances must not be forgotten.

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**The EU Green Deal** represented a mile stone in commitment to nullify net emissions of greenhouse gas, and as such should be included in the Covid-19 Response plan to ensure the targets that were originally set are still on-track to assure that no person and no place is left behind. **Women organisations must be consulted and included in Environmental and Climate Change related Covid-19 recovery consultation and response plans.**

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# Recommendations

1. Demonstration of Respect, Recognition, and Resources for Women Organisations as they stand equal in times of Crisis and Recovery being all time Frontline Warriors.
2. Concrete Engagement of International Changemakers who connect and strengthen the wide range of local partnerships and communities.
3. Establishment of a high-level International Gender Advisory Body that puts forward an action plan in times of crisis to ensure the engagement of vital women organisations.
4. To ensure continuity and sustainability, a Dedicated Non-Discriminatory Fund must urgently be launched to recognise and support the work of all women`s organisations, local and international alike.

## Conclusion

At the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, global leadership is faced with the challenge of maintaining its credibility in protecting and providing for its people. The locked down communities look up to the headship that is capable, intelligent, responsive, and leads with openness and engagement. The scale of the pandemic has had an impact reaching from the top to the bottom of all societies and from the north to the south of the globe. However, it is better contained by applying the engagement of various leadership instruments, such as the government, the non-governmental sector, religious, social, civil and military organisations, and in the arena of science and economics.

To this day, 50% of this world consists of women. Women perceived to be unequal, women who are oppressed, exploited, discriminated against and often violently treated both in and outside their homes. Women that are under almost-constant attack during peace, war, and conflict. **The world gender-equality support community is a treasure to combat worldwide gender-based discrimination.** They are one of the most needed leaders in the current climate to acknowledge and support the role of women and other civil society organisations.

This report concludes that a Covid-19 Recovery Response (ICRR) is only effective when it is Gender-Inclusive and engages the international and local leadership of women in their organisations. Even in the harshest of times as these, women organisations and women in leadership are making commitments to their partners, networks and constituencies with valuable initiatives and campaigns pushing for gender equality and inclusive response. Their actions keep emerging demanding attention and collaboration

The work European women organisations are doing is vital to boost the morale of their counterparts on other continents and, especially when joined together in such a global crisis, imperative to the continued functionality of society as a whole. There needs to be an appreciation of women`s resilience and an acknowledgement for their global leadership in Covid-19 Recovery Response efforts without much delay.

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**An Inclusive Covid-19 Recovery Response (ICRR) needs urgent Gender-Inclusive and Women Engaged mindset and your support.**

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