

## The gender aspect of COVID-19

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COVID-19 is a complex crisis that has impacts on all aspects whether health, economic, social or political. The living conditions of the vulnerable social groups that were already being affected by global problems have worsened. Massive studies and research are being published daily on COVID-19, and analysis is still underway to predict and comprehend the post-COVID-19 impacts. Nothing is certain yet, and we are still dwelling in assumptions and uncertainties; however, what is evident is that structural inequalities among marginalized target groups, mainly marginalized women and youth, and gender-based violence is severely increasing all over the world.

Data shows that the number of men infected by COVID-19 is more than women, but its impact on women is devastatingly increasing. As per the OECD, “women are the forefront of the battle against the pandemic as they make up almost 70 percent of the health care workforce, exposing them to greater risk of infection, while they are underrepresented in leadership and decision-making processes in the health care sector.” Moreover, women are also handling the household burden of family care and managing the family’s stress during the lockdown. Moreover, women are exposed to risks of violence, exploitation, abuse or harassment during times of crisis and quarantine. “Violence against women already represents a global health epidemic. Worldwide, more than one in three women have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or nonpartner sexual violence in their lifetime, per the OECD report “Women at the core of the fight against COVID-19 crisis.” Domestic violence is a result of the patriarchal masculinities that lead to power and control of men over women. As the COVID-19 crisis and its uncertainty are unfolding, there are social consequences that will impact the social norms and lifestyles on the long term. As an example, “men might want to reassert their control and express their frustrations caused by the lockdown through increased episodes of violence.”

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stated eight pressing risks in his statement to the Security Council on the COVID-19 pandemic last week. His concern was related to the impact of economic instability on women who constitute most of the labor power at the sectors affected worst by the crisis. In addition, he warned that in conflict settings female-headed households are vulnerable to the economic shocks.

At the Arab region’s level, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia in partnership with other United Nations agencies issued the policy brief “The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality in the Arab region” that introduces alarming numbers related to the economic fallout of the crisis on women. Even before the pandemic, the women’s labor participation in the Arab region has been already very weak, where men constitute 70 percent of the labor force. “The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to result in the loss of 1.7 million jobs in the Arab region, including approximately 700,000 jobs held by women. The informal sector will be mostly impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, and consequently the 61.8 percent of women working in the informal sector will be affected disproportionately.”

As for Lebanon, the suffering of women from the economic shock and domestic violence has increased since October 2019 with the economic crisis in Lebanon and uprisings in the streets. COVID-19 pandemic has come to worsen the situation of women in Lebanon that are suffering silently while stuck at their homes. The National Commission for Lebanese Women, in partnership with U.N. Women, UNFPA, and WHO is publishing a periodic Lebanon specific gender and COVID-19 alerts. The latest issue of the Gender Alert published last week focuses on access to justice and gender-based violence in Lebanon during the pandemic, and it includes five issues of attention with a set of recommendations. There is among them an essential issue related to the limited capacity for survivors at safe shelters. Most women’s shelters managed by the CSOs are at full capacity and unable to host new survivors. Other shelters are requesting from survivors to do the COVID-19 test, which is hard for women to conduct nowadays either due to its high cost or restricted criteria.

Therefore, whether internationally, regionally or nationally, governments are acting rapidly to support the health sector and hinder the economic implications of COVID-19. However, governments shall introduce a gender lens while designing and implementing their responses to tackle the social consequences besides the health and economic ones. Massive funds and support are being allocated for charity and developmental associations to provide food supplies and have cash transfers to the marginalized and poor communities. However, organizations working on supporting and protecting women shall be sufficiently funded and politically empowered to maximize their work in mapping and understanding the local status of women and providing the needed support for women and their health. Otherwise, COVID-19 will be inadvertently causing deep social problems and gender inequalities that we have been fighting for decades.

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