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## **WORLD: The rocky road to gender equality: Are women better off now than in 1970?**

By Kristyna Foltinova

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RFERL (13.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3gIkuly> - Fifty years ago, women had, on average, less than half the legal rights of men. In many countries, they weren't allowed to work in industrial jobs and there was no law protecting them against gender-based discrimination at work. Paid leave for mothers was offered in just a few countries and legislation addressing domestic violence was practically nonexistent.

Over the past few decades, many countries have made reforms toward greater gender equality, but despite this progress, women still face regulations that restrict their economic opportunities. Let's have a look at what has changed from 1970 till today.

### **Gender equality 50 years ago and now**

The Women, Business, And The Law Index issued by the World Bank ranks countries based on their legislation and regulations that affect women's economic opportunities. The index consists of eight indicators (such as mobility, pay, and pensions), which are structured around the life cycle of a working woman. The higher the score, the more gender-equal the legislation is.

In 1970, the global index was 46.3 points out of 100 -- meaning that, on average, women had less than half the legal rights of men. The biggest inequalities were observed in the areas of parenthood, the workplace, and pay.

Over subsequent decades, the index gradually increased and eventually reached 76.1 points in 2020. According to the latest report, parenthood and pay were still the areas where the biggest inequalities were found, and the World Bank considers only 10 countries in the world to be fully gender-equal.

Read full article [here](#).

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## **WORLD/UNICEF: Joining forces to develop a research agenda on intersections of violence against children and women**

By Anik Gevers, Elizabeth Dartnall, Alessandra Guedes, and Claudia García-Moreno

UNICEF (07.04.2021) – <https://bit.ly/3txkzqf> - There is growing global recognition of the intersections between violence against women and violence against children. Currently there is insufficient interaction between these fields, and evidence on interventions to address these linkages is limited. It is vital to identify knowledge/evidence gaps to address the intersections of these two forms of violence in order to strengthen prevention and response programming to achieve the best outcomes for both women and children.

To address this need, the Sexual Violence Research Initiative ([SVRI](#)), [UNICEF Innocenti](#), and the Special [Programme](#) on Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction (HRP) hosted by WHO are joining efforts to develop a global research agenda on the intersections between violence against women and violence against children. The new research agenda will contribute to building knowledge in a more systematic way, ensure that research efforts make the best use of limited resources, and serve to monitor progress over time. It will also inform the implementation of the multiagency [RESPECT Women](#) and [INSPIRE](#) frameworks, support UNICEF's [commitment](#) to respond to the gender dimensions of violence, [SRVI Grant-making](#) and promote coherence in the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development [Goals](#).

Historically, research agendas have been largely driven by researchers with limited input from other stakeholders. To promote participation and minimize the risks of bias, we are proposing to adapt the Child Health and Nutrition Research Initiative [method](#) and use online surveys and meetings to reach a wide group of stakeholders. SVRI, UNICEF Innocenti and WHO/HRP together make up the Coordinating Group which will implement this effort. An Advisory Group will help develop the framework and provide technical

input and guidance throughout the process. Finally, a broad group of Global Stakeholders – including researchers, advocates, policy-makers, and practitioners representing different countries, settings, disciplines and areas of focus – will provide inputs and promote dissemination and implementation of the final research agenda widely.

### **Collaborative Approach**

The initiative will build on lessons learned through collaboration with the Global Shared [Research Agenda](#) on Violence against Women and Girls, led by SVRI and the [Equality Institute](#), with participation of UNICEF Innocenti and the WHO, among others. Close collaboration among these processes will promote complementarity of the initiatives.

A stepwise approach to identifying research priorities for the intersections of violence against women and violence against children involves five broad phases (See <https://bit.ly/3dtei9t>).

In partnership with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine's [Gender Violence and Health Centre](#), two systematic reviews are underway that will identify research gaps in the published literature. These reviews focus on: The [co-occurrence of intimate partner violence](#) and child maltreatment: a systematic review of the common contributing factors and on [interventions that address](#) both child maltreatment and intimate partner violence in a coordinated way. In addition, other relevant systematic reviews will be identified.

The Coordinating and Advisory groups will develop a framework to guide a prioritisation process. Global Stakeholders will be invited to rank research priorities and provide additional inputs. The outcomes of these processes will be collated and analysed to identify research questions deemed to be of priority by the field. The Advisory Group will provide oversight of the analysis and results before they are widely disseminated, including through Global Stakeholder network.

### **Moving forward together**

Researchers, practitioners, activists and donors from both the violence against women and violence against children fields are recognizing that collaboration and increased coherence in programming are essential to meet women's, adolescents', and children's needs, and to maximise synergies. Therefore, rather than focusing on research priorities for women or children separately, this initiative will specifically target gaps in knowledge on the intersections between these different but related forms of violence.

A consultative, inclusive process among violence against women and violence against children stakeholders will identify areas where research can enhance coordination, alignment and consistency. The process, as much as the outcomes, will help strengthen both fields and build bridges for the benefit of children and women everywhere.

If you would like to join the Global Stakeholders, please [sign up](#) and we will include you in the database. All are welcome.

*For more information about this research priority setting process, please contact Anik Gevers (SVRI) at [anik@svri.org](mailto:anik@svri.org)*

### **Important links**

- [Violence Against Women and Violence Against Children - The Points of Intersection \(PPT\)](#)

- [Bridging the Gaps: Reviewing the intersections of violence against women and violence against children \(Event\)](#)
  - [Promoting an understanding of the intersection between violence against women and children \(Event\)](#)
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## **WORLD: A report on conflict-related sexual slavery**

***A report by the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (2020)***  
***See <https://bit.ly/2M9pVHr>***

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#### **Executive summary**

Conflict-related sexual slavery is a widespread, systematic, institutionalized, and deliberate human rights abuse committed by militaries under government supervision, state-sponsored militia groups, non-state armed groups, violent extremist groups, and criminal networks alike. Causing tremendous and long-lasting harm to women, girls, and entire communities, sexual slavery is used as a weapon of war, a wartime strategy, or a tactic of terrorism to recruit and retain fighters, fund operations, instill fear, destroy communities, and promote ideology.

The context in which conflict-related sexual slavery is occurring has evolved since World War Two. The rise of violent extremist groups and criminal networks has contributed to the widespread use of the bodies of women and girls as a form of currency in the political economy of war. Forced displacement, refugee crises, and humanitarian emergencies as a result of armed conflict have further exacerbated insecurity for women and girls, increasing their vulnerability to sexual slavery.

Survivors of sexual slavery are not a homogenous group—each individual experience is unique and affected by geography, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion, among other intersecting factors. Yet survivors across conflict contexts often face high levels of stigmatization and marginalization from their communities and families. In spite of this, many survivors have broken the barrier of silence and actively advocate for accountability and reparations from perpetrators, dispelling the narrative that survivors of conflict-related sexual slavery are passive victims without agency. In the absence of effective action taken by global and national policymakers to address conflict-related sexual slavery, survivors—with the support of women's civil society—call for accountability, justice, relief and recovery services, protection, and prevention of reoccurrence.

Although international human rights, humanitarian, and criminal laws and policies on preventing violent extremism and countering terrorism recognize and condemn conflict-related sexual slavery, significant gaps persist when it comes to consistent, coherent, and specific efforts at prevention, protection, accountability, and relief and recovery for survivors. The failure to address conflict-related sexual slavery through Bender-responsive peace processes, post-conflict resolution, and transitional justice mechanisms contributes to a reoccurrence of the crime, along with continued impunity for perpetrators and inadequate redress for survivors.

**The Women, Peace, and Security resolutions adopted by the United Nations Security Council provide a critical framework to improve the global response to conflict-related sexual slavery.**

However, it is essential to strengthen specific policies, provisions, and programming on conflict-related sexual slavery for the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security resolutions, including National Action Plans. Localization of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 is an important instrument to ensure that the needs of survivors of sexual slavery are met and to prevent the reoccurrence of the crime, through context-specific, survivor-centered conflict resolution initiatives developed in partnership with women's civil society.

The coinciding 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325, and the 20th anniversary of the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal for the Trial of Japan's Military Sexual Slavery in 2020 present a critical opportunity to highlight the need to step up the response to sexual slavery, particularly justice and reparation for survivors as well as prevention efforts. It is a unique moment for survivors, women's rights organizations, and civil society groups worldwide to demand that the United Nations, Member States, regional organizations, the International Criminal Court, and the International Court of Justice take concerted action to end sexual slavery in collaboration with civil society, the media, academia, faith-based institutions and other key stakeholders.

The Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), with support from the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), coordinated a global research to analyze historical and contemporary incidences of sexual slavery, from World War Two to the present geopolitical context. The overall goal of the research is to promote synergies in the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda, international humanitarian and human rights laws, and policies to prevent and counter violent extremism to improve the prevention of, protection from, accountability mechanisms for, and relief and recovery for survivors of sexual slavery. To ensure that this research reflects the voices of survivors of sexual slavery and women's civil society on the ground in conflict-affected communities, the research team produced three case studies: one on sexual slavery during World War Two in Asia and the Pacific, and two on more recent incidences of sexual slavery in Uganda and Iraq respectively. Key informant interviews and focus group discussions with survivors of conflict-related sexual slavery, women's rights activists, local and national government officials, human rights lawyers, and grassroots peacebuilders in Korea, Uganda, and Iraq, along with global policymakers were conducted.

This advocacy brief summarizes the key findings and recommendations of the global research and case studies. The full-length global research and case studies will also be made available. GNWP hopes that this research will inform and strengthen the global response to conflict-related sexual slavery and survivor-centered implementation of the WPS Agenda. Critically, this research will serve as a key advocacy tool for victims and survivors of sexual slavery and their families, and civil society activists.

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## **WORLD: Press release: 20 Years on, radical change needed to realize women's inclusion in peace and political power**

UN Women (29.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/34VJ4mX> - As 2 billion people across the world struggle to survive in areas afflicted by armed conflict in the midst of a global pandemic, women – who are disproportionately affected by such strife and play a key role as mediators and peacebuilders – remain largely excluded from formal peace processes and post-conflict power structures, a new United Nations report on Women Peace and Security shows.

The report, presented to the UN Security Council during today's annual Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security that commemorated the 20th anniversary of its landmark resolution 1325, outlines five goals to realize inclusive and sustainable peace in the next decade. These range from women's full inclusion in all peace efforts and unconditional defense of women's rights to reversing the historic rise in global military spending,

coupled with meeting minimum levels of financial assistance and launching a data revolution that sheds light and propels rapid action.

"As we recover from the pandemic, we face a choice. To continue down the path of increasing militarization, conflict and inter-generational losses. Or to work towards greater inclusion, equality, and prevention of conflicts and crises of all kinds," said UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

While countries struggle to provide basic services that underpin human security, military spending is at a historic high. In 2019 alone, global military expenditures reached USD1.9 trillion, following the largest annual increase in a decade. "The needs laid bare by the pandemic should be driving decision-making on national investment in peacebuilding, education, health and other vital public programmes with women fully included in all aspects of those considerations," said Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women. "When we change the face of politics, realize the lessons of decades of women's activism, alter perspective on budgets for social services rather than weapons, we will be positioned to sustain peace, overcome the climate crisis, recover from this pandemic, or prevent the next one. A COVID response that is truly inclusive represents a transformative opportunity for a more peaceful, sustainable and equitable world. It is time to heed this call", she added.

Twenty years after the passing of the Security Council resolution 1325, which set a new framework for women's leadership and inclusion in all aspects of peace, alarming gaps in implementation are holding back impact at a critical moment when a joint and undistracted effort to contain COVID-19 is needed. Peace is a pre-requisite for health, equality and human security. Despite the contributions that followed the resolution, women too often remain sidelined behind those holding the guns. On average, women were only 13 per cent of negotiators, 6 per cent of mediators, and 6 per cent of signatories in major peace processes between 1992 and 2019.

Amongst the group briefing the UN Security Council today was Danai Gurira, UN Women Goodwill Ambassador, award-winning playwright and actor, who said: "Most of the times, when women make their mark in spite of impossible odds, it is not because they were given the space and the opportunity, but because they protested against their exclusion and persisted.

Feminist organizations have repeatedly called for disarmament, arms control and shifting military spending to social investment. Women's groups were also among the first to echo the Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire to collectively focus in fighting the pandemic, earlier this year. Women peace activists are urging parties to conflict to silence their guns, because countries with infrastructure and health care systems decimated by conflict cannot fight a battle on two fronts.

"Peace cannot come at the cost of women's rights. All we have achieved hangs in the balance in the current negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government...We therefore urge the international community, including global and regional institutions, member states and donor countries, to exercise your responsibility to ensure that none of the parties involved, including the Taliban, restrict women's human rights, civil liberties or citizenship in any way," added Zarqa Yaftali, Afghan Activist and Executive Director of Women and Children Legal Research Foundation, who also briefed the Security Council.

Women are central to peace efforts, and they get results. The evidence is clear: having women at the peace table generates greater buy-in and strengthens accountability for implementation. Women's participation also makes peace more durable because, with their input, agreements go beyond the realm of power to the realities of people.



However, peace agreements with gender equality provisions increased from 14 per cent in 1995 to 22 per cent only in 2019.

Without radical action over the next decade to integrate women into all aspects of peace, we risk a continuous state of insecurity, heightened instability and prolonged conflicts.

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## **WORLD: Nobel prize: two women share chemistry prize for the first time for work on 'genetic scissors'**

By Kalpana Surendranath

The Conversation (07.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/375k2TY> - Emmanuelle Charpentier, director at the Max Planck Institute for Infection Biology in Germany, and Jennifer Doudna, professor of biochemistry at the University of California, Berkeley, US, are the joint winners of the Nobel prize in chemistry 2020 for the development of a precise method of editing genomes.

This is the first time two female scientists have won the prize, which amounts to ten million Swedish kronor (£861,200) and will be shared equally between the laureates.

The genome of an organism is a dynamic instruction book that not only contains the blueprint for how to create it but also physically controls various processes. This is in the form of DNA which is housed in the largest compartment of the human cell: the nucleus.

The CRISPR/Cas9 genetic scissors developed by the Nobel laureates is a type of molecular tool that can edit DNA by cutting and pasting sections of it. It allows scientists to precisely change any chosen letters in an organism's DNA code. The seven-year-old technology has already revolutionised several areas of biotechnology and biomedical sciences – a rare occurrence in this scientific field.

Charpentier discovered a previously unknown molecule, tracrRNA, when she was studying bacteria known as *Streptococcus pyogenes*. She realised that this molecule was part of the bacteria's immune system, known as CRISPR, where it would kill viruses by cutting up their DNA.

Doudna and Charpentier then collaborated to recreate this tool in a test tube, so it could be applied to any genome. This involved developing methods of reprogramming and simplifying it using elegant experimental systems.

### **Bright future ...**

CRISPR/Cas9 offers to bring enormous benefits to humans in various ways. For example, it could be used to create designer immune cells with enhanced abilities to seek and attack tumours. It could also help develop gene drives, genetic modifications designed to spread through a population at high rates of inheritance, to control mosquito-borne diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, yellow fever and Zika.

Excitingly, it even raises the possibility of bringing back extinct animals Jurassic-Park style, and creating greener energy by boosting lipid production in algae that can then be used as biofuels. The list is endless.

Amazingly, the ever expanding CRISPR toolbox allows researchers to introduce about 13 different changes in a single gene, offering a real chance of eradicating many inherited diseases. Before CRISPR, creating just a single change in a gene was complex and

cumbersome, making it nearly impossible for many laboratories around the world to apply it in their research.

As leader of the Genome Engineering lab at the University of Westminster, I am delighted to be a part of the CRISPR scientific community generating cellular models to understand biological pathways of human diseases.

### ***... but thorny issues remain***

That said, several questions about this tool remain to be answered. Due to its simplicity, the science of CRISPR is developing at a faster speed than the ethics for regulating its application. For example, when this technology is applied to “germ cells” – sperm and eggs – or embryos, it changes the germline. That means that any genetic changes it achieves will be passed down to future generations.

Research on germline genome editing therefore remains illegal in many parts of the world. But it has proven difficult to police. Chinese scientist He Jiankui shocked the world in 2018 when he announced that he had created the world’s first gene-edited human babies.

There is therefore an increasing need to understand the real science behind this splendid tool. It will need continuous conversation among scientists, policy makers and general members of the public to make sure it is used for the betterment of humankind.

The journey in science feels wonderful when one gets an opportunity to encounter great scientists. It has been a privilege to meet Doudna, a scientist as simple and elegant as the tool she co-developed. Even after a lengthy talk at the Royal Society’s CRISPR revolution: changing the life conference in 2018, she continued to patiently answer questions from the curious crowd with a smile. She is a great role model that could inspire a new generation of female, as well as male, scientists.

I believe CRISPR has not only rewritten the genetic code but also the future. Thanks to the hard work by 2020’s chemistry Nobel laureates we no doubt have plenty of life-changing discoveries to look forward to in the next decades.

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## **WORLD: ‘Toxic’: Online abuse drives women, girls from social media**

***New study finds nearly 60 percent of women and girls using Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have suffered abuse.***

Al Jazeera (05.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/34vvZPL> - Online abuse is driving girls to quit social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, with nearly 60 percent experiencing harassment, according to a new global study.

One in five girls and young women has abandoned or cut down her use of a social media platform after being targeted, with some saying harassment started when they were as young as eight years old, the survey by girls’ equality group Plan International showed.

“Girls are being silenced by a toxic level of harassment,” the organisation’s chief executive, Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen, said on Sunday.

Attacks were most common on Facebook, where 39 percent of girls polled said they had been harassed, followed by Instagram (23 percent), WhatsApp (14 percent), Snapchat (10 percent), Twitter (9 percent) and TikTok (6 percent).

The charity, which will share the report with social media companies and legislators around the world, said the abuse was suppressing girls' voices at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic was increasing the importance of online communication.

It called on social media companies to take urgent action to address the issue and urged governments to pass laws to deal with online harassment.

The study found reporting tools were ineffective in stopping the abuse, which included explicit messages, pornographic photos and cyberstalking.

Nearly half of the girls targeted had been threatened with physical or sexual violence, according to the poll. Many said the abuse took a mental toll, and a quarter felt physically unsafe.

"It is time for this to stop. Girls should not have to put up with behaviour online which would be criminal on the streets," the report said.

Facebook and Instagram said they used artificial intelligence to look for bullying content, constantly monitored users' reports of abuse and always removed rape threats.

Twitter said it also used technology to catch abusive content and has launched tools to improve users' control over their conversations.

The survey polled 14,000 girls and young women aged 15 to 25 in 22 countries including Brazil, India, Nigeria, Spain, Thailand and the United States.

Albrechtsen said activists, including those campaigning for gender equality and on LGBT+ issues, were often targeted particularly viciously, and their lives and families threatened.

"Driving girls out of online spaces is hugely disempowering in an increasingly digital world, and damages their ability to be seen, heard and become leaders," she added.

In an open letter to Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter, girls from around the world called on social media companies to create more effective ways to report abuse.

"We use [your platforms] not just to connect with friends, but to lead and create change. But they are not safe for us. We get harassed and abused on them. Every. Single. Day," they wrote.

"As this global pandemic moves our lives online, we are more at risk than ever."

Plan International also urged the companies to do more to hold to account those behind such abuse, and to collect data on the scale of the problem.

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## **WORLD: Caster Semenya loses appeal for equal treatment**

***Swiss Court upholds regulations biased against women athletes.***

By Minky Worden

HRW (08.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/35oVdBK> - The Federal Supreme Court of Switzerland has ruled that sport regulations that violate women's rights cannot be struck down as inconsistent with Swiss public policy, dealing a blow to the rights of all women athletes. The court came to this conclusion despite finding that the regulations in question – which create a regime of discriminatory surveillance and medical interventions on women – violate fundamental human rights of the South African runner Caster Semenya.

The Swiss court was reviewing an appeal by Semenya, who has been targeted for a decade by variations of the regulations, and ruled ineligible to compete. In 2019, the Court of Arbitration for Sport, based in Lausanne, Switzerland, upheld the most recent version of the regulations, which targets a subset of women with variations of their sex characteristics and naturally occurring elevated testosterone levels.

The regulations compel these women to undergo medical interventions or be forced out of competition. Identifying which athletes are impacted by the regulations will be done through subjecting all women athletes' bodies to public scrutiny and requiring those that seem "suspect" to undergo a medical examination. Men athletes are subject to no such surveillance or compelled medical tests.

There is no clear scientific consensus that women with naturally occurring higher-than-typical testosterone have a performance advantage in athletics. For these women athletes, being compelled to undergo a medical examination can be humiliating and medically unnecessary, as well as disrespectful of their rights.

The regulations target women in running events between 400 meters and 1 mile. Semenya's favored event was the 800 meter race, in which she won the gold medal in the 2016 Rio Olympics.

In a [report](#) published earlier this year, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights recommends immediately revoking eligibility regulations for women athletes like those enforced by World Athletics, track and field's global governing body. The World Medical Association has [recommended](#) that physicians around the world should not observe the regulations as they violate medical ethics. The decision from the Federal Supreme Court means that the regulations will remain for now.

"I will continue to fight for the human rights of female athletes, both on the track and off the track, until we can all run free the way we were born," Semenya said in a statement about the Swiss ruling.

In this Olympic year, athletes are looking to the International Olympic Committee to set guidelines to protect women athletes from abusive and invasive surveillance, testing, and bans. Caster's case shows how urgent this is.

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## **WORLD: Hitting women hard, pandemic makes gender poverty gap wider: U.N.**

By Anastasia Moloney

Thomson Reuters Foundation (02.09.2020) - <https://reut.rs/3hhIMKa> - The coronavirus pandemic will widen the poverty gap between women and men, pushing 47 million more women and girls into impoverished lives by next year, and undoing progress made in recent decades, the United Nations said on Wednesday.

Worldwide more women than men will be made poor by the economic fallout and massive job losses caused by COVID-19, with informal workers worst hit in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, according to new U.N. estimates.

“The increases in women’s extreme poverty ... are a stark indictment of deep flaws in the ways we have constructed our societies and economies,” Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the head of U.N. Women, said in a statement.

During the pandemic, women have lost their jobs at a faster rate than men have, as they are more likely to be employed in the sectors hardest hit by long lockdowns such as retail, restaurants and hotels, it said.

Women are also more likely to work in the informal economy, typically in jobs as domestic workers and cleaners that often come with little or no health care, unemployment benefits or other protections.

“We know that women take most of the responsibility for caring for the family; they earn less, save less and hold much less secure jobs,” Mlambo-Ngcuka said.

According to the U.N.’s International Labour Organization (ILO), about 70% of domestic workers globally had lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19 by June this year.

Overall, the pandemic will push an additional 96 million people into extreme poverty by next year, of whom nearly half are women and girls, according to estimates by U.N. Women and the U.N.’s Development Programme (UNDP).

This will bring the total number of women and girls worldwide living in extreme poverty to 435 million - defined as a person living on \$1.90 a day or less - and it is expected that this figure will not revert to pre-pandemic levels until 2030.

By 2021, for every 100 men aged 25 to 34 living in extreme poverty, there will be 118 women - a gap expected to increase to 121 women per 100 men by 2030, according to U.N. estimates.

Governments could adopt measures to help women in low-paid and informal jobs, said Achim Steiner, a UNDP administrator.

“More than 100 million women and girls could be lifted out of poverty if governments implement a comprehensive strategy aimed at improving access to education and family planning, fair and equal wages, and expanding social transfers,” Steiner said.

Nearly three in every five of the world’s poor women live in sub-Saharan Africa, and the region will continue to be home to the highest number of the world’s poorest after the pandemic.

Recent gains made in reducing poverty rates in South Asia are threatened as the region is set to face a “resurgence” in extreme poverty, with women worst affected, the U.N. said.

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## **WORLD: Top doctors and lawyers condemn ‘shocking’ treatment of women in childbirth during COVID-19**

***Exclusive: openDemocracy investigation reveals 'traumatic' incidents defying WHO guidelines in 45 countries – as experts warn of 'tens of thousands' of extra maternal deaths.***

By Nandini Archer & Claire Provost

openDemocracy (16.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3fyJ3HE> - Top doctors and lawyers from around the world have condemned the “shocking and disturbing” treatment of women giving birth during the COVID-19 pandemic, a new openDemocracy investigation reveals today.

Since March, openDemocracy has identified cases of “traumatic” experiences in at least 45 countries that contravene World Health Organization (WHO) guidance, and some national laws. In at least six countries, pregnant women have also died after COVID-19 restrictions reportedly prevented or delayed access to emergency services.

Dozens of women across Europe, Latin America and Africa have also described to openDemocracy their own first-hand experiences of:

- birth companions banned from hospitals – in some cases even after other lockdown restrictions have been lifted;
- forcible separation from newborns and being prevented from breastfeeding – despite no evidence that breast milk can transmit coronavirus;
- pain medication withheld because hospital resources including anaesthesiologists were diverted to the COVID-19 response;
- procedures performed without their consent, including caesarean sections, induced labour and episiotomies, to speed up labour.

Maternal health advocates say that while incidents like these occurred in many countries before COVID-19, responses to the pandemic have made these problems worse.

The findings come as experts warn that COVID-19 restrictions could cause “tens of thousands” of additional maternal deaths around the world.

Across Latin America, which already had the world’s highest C-section rate, doctors and maternal health advocates have warned that the number of these procedures has also increased because of “misguided policies” and “fear of overloading hospitals”.

In many cases, these procedures have been performed against women’s wishes and without the medical justification that the WHO guidelines and national laws require.

In Uganda, a doctor at one hospital told openDemocracy she knows of at least three women who died after they couldn’t reach the hospital due to transport restrictions.

Other women in labour and distress reported being turned away from health centres or shunned by medical staff, because they appeared to have coronavirus symptoms or didn’t have masks, or because maternity facilities were rededicated to the COVID-19 response.

Experts have raised concerns of many more cases like this in countries where health infrastructure was already fragile before the outbreak.

Some hospitals have reversed restrictions affecting women giving birth, following local media coverage and campaigns. In countries including Armenia and Ukraine, however, bans on birth companions have remained even after lockdowns have eased.

"My husband and I are ready to handcuff ourselves together if doctors won't allow him in," said one woman in Ukraine who recently launched an online petition to be allowed to give birth with her partner in the room.

"It seems we've slipped through a gap," says Zaynab Iman from the UK, who described feeling "abandoned" in March with the "heartbreaking" cries of other women at one London hospital that had temporarily banned companions.

A woman in Ecuador also told openDemocracy she felt "abandoned" when she gave birth in late March at a health centre without medical assistance. "They left me alone with my husband in the delivery room, with no one to advise us or tell us anything."

Health experts told openDemocracy that these restrictions on women giving birth were "unnecessary" and lawyers said there could be legal consequences for governments whose pandemic responses failed to protect women's rights.

"openDemocracy's research clearly reveals how unnecessary restrictions constitute an alarming pattern of women's health and rights being deprioritised during the crisis," said Belgian MEP Petra De Sutter, who is also a gynaecologist and president of the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF).

"There is no reason... that women should be denied respectful care," said Quazi Monirul Islam, a medical doctor involved in drafting WHO's 2005 childbirth guidelines. The global health body has emphasised that these guidelines still apply under COVID-19.

Islam partly blamed an "initial panic" by hospitals faced with the pandemic. He compared it to his time working in Botswana in the 1980s when, he says, hospitals misunderstanding HIV research had also separated women and children at birth.

But Melissa Upreti, a lawyer and member of a working group on discrimination against women at the UN human rights office OHCHR, warned that around the world "the risk of contagion has been used as a pretext to deny proper care."

"It's really shocking and disturbing," she said, calling the denial of services that women need "discrimination from a legal standpoint. We do have a very strong case to make... that governments are violating their own laws and policies."

"You can be sure, cases are going to be filed," says Nelly Warega, a lawyer with the Women's Link Worldwide NGO in Kenya. She said African governments could face lawsuits if their lockdown rules led to the death or injury of pregnant women.

"We expect more from our governments in times of crisis," added Austrian MP Petra Bayr, chair of the Council of Europe parliamentary assembly's equality committee and EPF vice-president. "They must be held accountable for the mistreatment documented by openDemocracy and put in place systems to make sure this doesn't happen again."

### ***'Dehumanising treatment'***

World Health Organization (WHO) guidance on childbirth during the pandemic, published in March, reiterates its long-standing advice that women giving birth should be treated with dignity and respect and given clear communication and appropriate pain relief.

This guidance adds that women should be accompanied by a person of their choice while giving birth, and they should be supported to breastfeed and have skin-to-skin contact with newborns, even if they are COVID-19 positive. Procedures including C-sections

should only be performed when they are medically necessary or have the woman's consent.

Many countries have national policies that echo these principles and in Latin America several countries have in recent years passed laws against "obstetric violence".

However, openDemocracy has identified cases in at least 45 countries of women who were reportedly treated in ways that defy this guidance during the pandemic.

These cases include bans on birth companions at some hospitals in at least 35 countries; forcible separations of women and newborns in at least fifteen countries; and cases of women who said they were not supported to breastfeed in at least seven countries (despite no evidence that the virus can be transmitted via breast milk).

In eleven countries, women reported that they didn't consent to the C-sections, induction and episiotomies (the cutting of a woman's vagina) that were performed on them, or said that they did not believe these procedures were medically justified.

In at least 20 countries, COVID-19 restrictions including curfews and transport bans have blocked women's access to critical health care before, during or after birth. In at least thirteen cases in six countries, this led to deaths of the women or their babies.

Large global firms that make baby formula have separately been accused of 'exploiting' the pandemic by taking advantage of mothers' fears of transmitting coronavirus through breastfeeding to aggressively promote their products.

WHO's director of sexual and reproductive health, Ian Askew, says its guidelines are "based on the best scientific evidence available". They exist to ensure respectful care, and should be followed everywhere, both during the pandemic and beyond, he added.

"Many of us are receiving anecdotal reports of women not receiving respectful, dignified or high-quality care before, during and following childbirth," says Askew, who is also a medical doctor, calling this an "alarming" trend.

A spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, said it has also received reports of abuses during COVID-19 childbirths. "Documenting these incidents is a critical first step to exposing the problem", they said.

"Governments need to act now," says Enid Muthoni from the Center for Reproductive Rights in Brussels, adding that "it is entirely possible for European health systems to follow WHO's guidelines while responding to the pandemic."

### ***Disrespected and endangered***

Across several African countries there have been reports of women who couldn't reach hospital in time during emergencies due to COVID-19-related transport restrictions. Some of these women reportedly died as a result, while others delivered their babies by the roadside or in other unsanitary public places.

The imposition of coronavirus curfews and transport restrictions in Latin America has also led to women missing antenatal check-ups, walking long distances to reach hospital, or being forced to have unplanned and risky home births.

Responding to openDemocracy's findings, maternal health advocates acknowledge that COVID-19 has made things worse for women in childbirth. However, they emphasise



that, even before the pandemic, too many women have felt disrespected or endangered while giving birth.

In recent years, this has been increasingly well documented including by the WHO which led a study published in the Lancet last year which found that 42% of women interviewed by researchers in Ghana, Guinea, Myanmar and Nigeria said they experienced physical or verbal abuse, stigma or discrimination during childbirth in health facilities.

In Latin America over the last decade, several countries have specifically outlawed “dehumanising treatment and/or abusive medicalisation” of women giving birth, defining “obstetric violence” as a specific type of criminalised gender violence.

But, says Mercedes Muñoz, head of the NGO Venezuelan Association for an Alternative Sex Education, despite the law in her country, obstetric violence “is so normalised by authorities and medical staff”.

“Women feel they risk being unassisted or neglected if they demand their rights, and this usually makes them keep quiet,” she says. “What pregnant women have to go through in Venezuela is absolutely Dantesque.”

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## **WORLD: UN Committee stands with women and girls in global anti-racism protests**

OHCHR (10.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2B3eY4O> - The UN women's rights committee has called for a new era of human rights and gender justice, stressing that the lives of black women and girls also matter.

In a statement issued today, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) said it stood in solidarity with the millions of women and girls who joined the protests after the killing of George Floyd, insisting that their voices calling for an end of racism be heard.

The violence inflicted on George Floyd by four police officers in the United States in May has generated anti-racist protests and solidarity movements throughout the world.

"At the most vulnerable moment, Mr. Floyd called for his mother, as have other victims before him, reminding us of the great loss, pain and economic dislocation that women experience in losing their children, spouses and partners, siblings and other family members in this unrelenting cycle of racist violence," the Committee said.

While the majority of killings have been of African American men, African American women, including Yvonne Smallwood, Aiyana Jones, Sandra Bland, and Breonna Taylor, have also been victims of police brutality. Taylor was a 25-year-old emergency medical technician who was shot in her bed when police raided the wrong house in March 2020.

The Committee affirms that women and girls are also victims of racism and are directly and indirectly affected by racial injustice and discrimination. While African descendants are especially affected, the Committee is also concerned about systemic racism and discrimination against indigenous/aboriginal and Roma women and girls throughout the world.

"The Committee recognizes this legacy (of racism) and the imperative to add our voices to those calling for justice and human rights for all," CEDAW said in its statement.

In this International Decade for People of African Descent, 2015–2024, declared by the United Nations, the Committee said it stood in solidarity with the family, friends and community of all victims of systemic racism and racist violence globally, and all who have risen in justifiable indignation.

The full statement is available [online](#).

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## **WORLD: When will sports stop policing femininity?**

***UN Human Rights Commissioner rebukes sex testing women athletes.***

By Kyle Knight

HRW (01.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/321DYo4> - In a [report](#) published this week, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights recommends that eligibility regulations for women athletes like those enforced by World Athletics, track and field's global governing body, be revoked immediately.

The regulations target women athletes with some variations in their sex characteristics that cause their natural testosterone levels to be higher than typical. The regulations deny these women the right to participate as women for running events between 400 meters and 1 mile unless they submit to invasive testing and medically unnecessary procedures. There is no clear scientific consensus that women with naturally occurring higher-than-typical testosterone have a performance advantage in athletics. There are no similar regulations for men.

These regulations rose to prominence as a result of the decade-long controversy surrounding South African runner Caster Semenya, who lost her appeal for equal treatment in the Court of Arbitration for Sport last year. Semenya's case came in the wake of another groundbreaking fight against gender discrimination in sports by courageous Indian sprinter, Dutee Chand. Runners in Kenya, Burundi, and Uganda have also been negatively affected by the regulations.

The UN's report roundly criticizes the regulations, saying they "create the risk of unethical medical practice" by blurring the line between informed consent and coercion and encouraging medically unnecessary procedures (a critique the World Medical Association issued previously). The report also points to the power imbalances between the doctors affiliated with sporting bodies and athletes, saying: "in sport, such power imbalances are compounded by athletes' dependency on the sports federations requiring such medical interventions and the frequent absence of adequate and holistic support during the decision-making process."

These regulations are stigmatizing, stereotyping, and discriminatory, and have no place in sport or society. They amount to a policing of women's bodies on the basis of arbitrary definitions of femininity and racial stereotypes.

The report authors call on sporting bodies such as World Athletics and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to carry out "in conjunction with athletes, public education campaigns to counter gender-stereotyped and racist attitudes to address negative and stereotypical portrayals of women and girl athletes in the media, including attitudes about appropriate norms of femininity."

Indeed, as the convener of global sport, the IOC should lead in upholding human rights.

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## **WORLD: Support civil society at the UN Security Council**

By Kaavya Asoka

NGOWG (01.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3eaCtXg> - Six months into 2020, during what should be a celebratory year for women's civil society marking the 20th anniversary of Resolution 1325 (2000), their voices are barely heard at the UN Security Council. Why?

Since 1 January 2020, the Council has held 53 formal meetings and 64 open VTCs during which 21 civil society briefers have delivered statements, 11 of whom were women. This represents a 38.9% decrease compared to 2019.

The current limitations facing the Security Council as it conducts its work virtually undoubtedly pose challenges to civil society participation. However, in the more than three months since the Council began working remotely, it has become clear that these are not merely technical challenges but a lack of political will — a deprioritization of the voices of independent civil society despite Council member's claims of women's critical role in ensuring peace and security.

The NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security (NGOWG) has nominated 18 civil society representatives under all six presidencies to brief the Council on 12 different agenda items, pursuant to the Security Council's commitment to invite women civil society representatives to brief during country-specific meetings under Resolution 2242 (2015).

### ***Warnings from civil society about exclusion***

On April 18, along with 30 other human rights, humanitarian, development and women's rights organizations, we wrote to the President of the Security Council to raise concerns around the transparency of the work of the Security Council and obstacles to the effective participation of civil society due to changes to its working methods under the COVID-19 pandemic. On May 11, we followed up with supportive Council members to continue to raise the alarm regarding what we saw as a continuing pattern of exclusion. In parallel, other civil society organizations have raised similar concerns around barriers to inclusive and meaningful engagement of civil society as well as risks of intimidation and reprisals in the context of other virtual UN meetings, including the High-Level Political Forum and the Human Rights Council.

However, despite the repeated warnings issued by dozens of organizations from around the world, the pattern of exclusion continues. This trend must be urgently reversed, lest we lose the gains made over the last four years.

In response to this downward trend, since early April, we have continued to facilitate informal briefings between women's civil society representatives and Security Council members on Colombia, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Yemen, Mali, the Central African Republic and South Sudan. With our support, Council members have heard from 14 women with expertise on nine different countries over the course of the last two months.

However, we are concerned that these informal channels will become a replacement for civil society participation in the formal work of the Security Council. As we have repeatedly raised with Council members: women civil society representatives must not be relegated to only informal spaces, where they will not be able to share their perspectives with the full Council membership. This is counter to the Council's own commitments as laid out in Resolution 2242 (2015).

## ***The Security Council must live up to its own promises***

Over the last 19 years, the Security Council has reinforced, acknowledged and highlighted the role of civil society over 500 times, calling for Member States and the UN to work with civil society in conflict prevention efforts, peacebuilding, provision of humanitarian assistance and peace processes[1] and has, on multiple occasions, recognized the role of civil society, particularly women's groups, as crucial interlocutors in conflict situations.

Since the adoption of Resolution 2242 (2015), the number and diversity of women civil society briefers at the UN Security Council has increased; from nine women in 2016 to 40 in 2019. These briefers bring a wealth of expertise and experience to the Security Council, enriching its discussions by highlighting marginalized perspectives and raising issues that would otherwise be overlooked in favor of political considerations. The importance of these briefings, however, goes far beyond numbers.

Issues related to women, peace and security are less likely to be raised if they aren't raised first by a civil society brifer.[2] Briefings by civil society leaders expand the understanding of policymakers related to the role of women's organizations in mediating and negotiating local disputes or advocating on behalf of their communities in parallel to formal peace processes. The tendency of the international community to focus largely on high-level, formal processes is detrimental to a deeper understanding of the complexity of crisis situations and, importantly, the central role of women peacebuilders, human rights defenders and women's civil society organizations on the frontlines providing essential services and resolving conflicts. This means that without these briefings, the critical perspectives of individuals and communities who are directly affected by the Council's decision-making are not being heard, nor are Council members making these decisions with a full picture of the situation on the ground.

Civil society can often be more effective than international actors in settling local disputes or providing services such as humanitarian and development assistance — these are, after all, their own communities, and they have valuable insight into what drives local conflicts as well as the best solutions. Yemeni activists, for example, have recently highlighted that the Mothers of Abductees Association, who were excluded from the Stockholm peace talks, have negotiated the release of more than 940 arbitrarily detained persons — meanwhile, there has been no progress through the UN-led process to date. The Security Council only stands to benefit from hearing these perspectives — and learning from and supporting such strategies — when civil society contributes to its discussions. This is also why we have strongly advocated for women-led society to be actively consulted and included in shaping responses to COVID-19 and emphasized the importance of women's leadership in designing and implementing pandemic responses.

Civil society briefers take risks to share their perspectives in public fora — it is therefore essential that they are heard at the highest levels, and that their recommendations are acted upon. As an organization that has supported 47 briefers in Security Council meetings and open debates since 2009, we are acutely aware of the risks that civil society take when they criticize their governments or parties to conflict and challenge social and gender norms. They work in dangerous contexts, relentlessly undertaking courageous work to serve their communities — defending human rights, delivering life-saving services to survivors of gender-based violence, advocating for the protection of women's rights in law and practice, and undertaking direct negotiations with armed actors on the local level, to name but a few. In 2019 alone, at least three civil society briefers experienced a backlash following their briefings to the Security Council as a direct result of raising issues related to attacks on civil society, enforced disappearances, gender-based violence and systematic exclusion of women from public and political processes. Each brifer was harassed via social media, and one brifer was the subject of

a formal letter of complaint by their government to the President of the Security Council. There are, of course, many others.

Civil society representatives brief the UN Security Council in the hope that the Council will not simply listen to them but hear what they have to say. But if their recommendations are not acted upon, the risks they face are all for nothing.

Concerns are now deepening among civil society that the current deprioritization of civil society access and participation will be exploited by Security Council members that have historically been hostile to their participation in the first place upon returning to formal, in-person meetings. Supportive Council members must act now to ensure that civil society is heard and that their concerns are reflected in Council discussions. Security Council members must elevate their voices, their work and their legitimacy, and lay the important groundwork for civil society, human rights defenders and peacebuilders to be recognized and valued, to protect civic space, and to prevent attacks and reprisals rather than responding to them after they have taken place.

**We therefore urge the Security Council to prioritize the following:**

- In line with Resolution 2242 (2015), ensure women civil society briefers are invited to brief the Security Council during country-specific meetings, including during open VTCs, and not limited to briefing only during thematic open debates, informal briefings or side events.
- Maintain the foundational principle of independence by ensuring that civil society briefers are selected and supported by civil society organizations, and not only hand-picked by Security Council members.
- Ensure that the recommendations put forth by civil society briefers are acted upon in all outcome documents and statements delivered by Security Council members, and track and follow implementation of these recommendations as called for by the UN Secretary-General in 2019 as one of six immediate actions to be taken by Security Council members.

As a coalition dedicated to gender equality and women's human rights, the voices of grassroots women's civil society are at the heart of the NGOWG's work; they should be at the center of the Security Council's work as well. In a year that was meant to resonate with the voices of women — 40 years since the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 25 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and 20 years since the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) — the Security Council can and should do better. If not now, when?

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## **WORLD: COVID-19 increases suffering of children in conflict**

By Samira Sadeque

IPS News (25.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/38de6H0> - The current coronavirus pandemic is having a profound affect on children in conflict zones — with girls especially being at higher risk of violence and sexual health concerns.

“For adolescent girls specifically, these disruptions can have profound consequences, including increased rates of pregnancy and child, early, and forced marriage,” Shannon Kowalski, director of advocacy and policy at the International Women’s Health Coalition (IWHC), told IPS.

Kowalski shared her concerns this week after an open debate on children and armed conflict at the United Nations, where experts shared the progress made in the efforts to pull children out of conflict-ridden circumstances, as well as how the current pandemic has made the issue more complex.

Virginia Gamba, special representative of the secretary-general for children and armed conflict, said her team had documented 25,000 grave violations against children.

Henrietta Fore, executive director of U.N. Children’s Fund (UNICEF), said at the Jun. 23 briefing that although the organisation had rescued almost 37,000 children in the past three years, there remains massive concerns about the number of children still in dire situations.

She cited the U.N.’s monitoring and reporting mechanism statistics over the last 15 years that reflect this reality.

UNICEF documented a total of 250,000 cases of grave violations against children in armed conflict, including:

- the recruitment and use of over 77,000 children;
- killing and maiming of over 100,000 children;
- rape and sexual violence against over 15,000 children;
- abduction of over 25, 000 children; and
- nearly 17,000 attacks on schools and hospitals.

The numbers reflect a grave — and timely — reality. On May 12, terrorists blew up a hospital in Kabul, Afghanistan, killing 24 people, including two infants. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has since pulled out from the hospital citing security concerns.

This only deepens the problem for marginalised populations such as women and children. Fore said children in conflict zones who are now further caught in the pandemic are at a “double disadvantage”, given that they’re likely finding themselves at “increased risk of violence, abuse, child marriage and recruitment to armed groups”.

### ***A general increase in conflict***

Experts say there has been a general increase in organised violence in various parts of the world under the pandemic. Sam Jones, communications manager at Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), a data collection and crisis mapping project, told IPS that they’ve documented state repression and consequential violence in some places under the pandemic, while in some other cases, “warring parties have used the pandemic as an opportunity to escalate campaigns or push the advantage”.

Jones’ concern was reflected in Fore’s speech on Jun. 23, where she pointed out that when states manipulate this kind of crisis, it’s the children who are hardest hit.

“Far too often, parties in conflict are using the pandemic and the need to reach and support children...for political advantage,” she said. “Children are not pawns or bargaining chips — this must stop.”

Certain areas have seen what Jones said is the largest increase in organised violence since the pandemic broke out around the world: Libya, Yemen, India, Mali and Uganda.

For all the countries, except Uganda, it was a mere intensification of already existing violence; in Uganda, the violence came in the form of government restrictions.

“By mid-April, ACLED had already recorded more than 1,000 total fatalities from conflict in Mali. Over the first three months of the year, we recorded nearly 300 civilian fatalities specifically, a 90 percent increase compared to the previous quarter,” he said.

“At best, violence has continued despite the pandemic, while at worst both armed groups and state forces could be using it as an opportunity to ramp up activity and target civilians,” he added.

### **How conflict affects children and girls**

The crisis in Mali is especially of importance as human rights advocates released a statement of concern just a day after the briefing, about Mali’s failure to curb female genital mutilation (FGM).

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) raised alarms about the report released by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which stated more than 75 percent of girls under the age of 14 had gone through the practice as of 2015.

Among other findings, the committee found that government has “failed to guarantee victims of female genital mutilation access to adequate and affordable health care, including sexual and reproductive health care”.

Concerns raised by experts such as Fore and Kowalski, when put next to the data about the ongoing conflict and continued prevalence of FGM in Mali, creates a worrying picture for the West African nation.

The committee report found that the women and girls in Mali already had limited access to sexual and reproductive health.

Meanwhile, Fore pointed out that the pandemic has exacerbated the lack of access for women and girls in countries that were already struggled to provide access. This raises the questions about how, on top of being a country in conflict, the pandemic is further exacerbating the health of girls who suffered FGM in Mali.

Fore said the current pandemic further adds layers to the crisis surrounding children in armed conflict.

“As the pandemic spreads, healthcare facilities have been damaged or destroyed by conflict, services have been suspended, children are missing out of basic medical care including vaccination, and water; sanitary systems have been damaged or destroyed altogether making it impossible for children to wash their hands,” she said.

Meanwhile, Kowalski of IWHC raised concerns about U.S. President Donald Trump’s recent decision to pull funding from the World Health Organisation, and what that means for girls caught in conflict.

“In addition, in most countries affected by COVID-19 we are experiencing increases in gender-based violence, reduced access to contraception, abortion, and other

reproductive health services, and a decrease in the quality of maternal health care — all which are intensified for women and girls in conflict,” she said.

Gamba, after sharing the statistics of children suffering in conflict, ended her speech on an important note.

“Behind these figures are boys and girls with stolen childhoods and shattered dreams, and there are families and communities torn apart by violence and suffering,” she said. “The only thing children and communities have in common today is their hope for peace, a better life and a better future. We must rise to meet that expectation.”

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## **WORLD: Including widows in the work to “build back better” from COVID-19**

***Statement for International Widows Day by Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka.***

UN Women (23.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/31n2pfk> - Over the past several months, we have seen the myriad ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic impacts the lives of women and men differently. Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the effects of the pandemic are exacerbated for women and girls. At the same time, mortality from the virus tends to be higher for men. UN Women’s data hub, Women Count, presents World Health Organization data that shows men account for 59 per cent of coronavirus deaths in Italy, 68 per cent in Mexico and 77 per cent in Thailand. This represents a devastating human loss, and one that is likely leaving tens of thousands of women newly widowed at just the time when they are cut off from their usual socio-economic and family supports.

Already, widows were largely unseen, unsupported and unmeasured in our societies. The latest figures that we have (2015) estimate that some 258 million women globally have been widowed. The actual number is likely to be much higher and to grow further as the coronavirus and its related effects on health continue to rage around the world.

Experience from past pandemics, for example HIV/AIDS and Ebola, shows that widows are often denied inheritance rights, have their property grabbed after the death of a partner, and can face extreme stigma and discrimination, as perceived ‘carriers’ of disease. Worldwide, women are much less likely to have access to old age pensions than men, so the death of a spouse can lead to destitution for older women. In the context of lockdowns and economic closures, widows may not have access to bank accounts and pensions to pay for healthcare if they too become ill or to support themselves and their children. With lone-mother families and single older women already particularly vulnerable to poverty, this is an area that needs urgent attention.

Governments must provide immediate support, while working to revamp social and economic structures in the long-term. In addition to legal reform to ensure that widows have equal inheritance and property rights, we need to see fiscal stimulus programmes that support widows and older single women economically. For example, the reach and benefit levels of social assistance programmes such as cash transfers and social pensions should be expanded and these benefits must be accessible to those without bank accounts. It is critical to invest in the work of civil society, in particular grassroots and community-based groups, who can provide widows with vital support at the local level and challenge the discriminatory, sometimes deadly social norms that they face.



Widows must not be left out of our work to “build back better” from COVID-19. Let us ensure that our recovery prioritizes their unique needs and supports societies to be more inclusive, resilient and equal for all.

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## **WORLD: End violence, harassment at work**

### ***Speed ratification of global standards adopted a year ago.***

HRW (18.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3dvvFDm> - Governments should prioritize ratification of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Violence and Harassment Convention, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today, on the eve of its first anniversary. The groundbreaking treaty, adopted June 21, 2019 by government, employer, and worker members of the ILO, sets international legal standards for preventing and responding to violence and harassment at work.

The 31-page report, “[Dignity and Safety at Work: A Guide to the 2019 ILO Violence and Harassment Convention](#),” highlights the main obligations for governments set out in the treaty and elements of national laws and policies that reflect promising practices.

“No one should have to tolerate violence and harassment, but for many workers – especially women – it is often an inevitable part of getting or keeping a job,” said Nisha Varia, women’s rights advocacy director at Human Rights Watch. “The ILO Violence and Harassment Convention provides critical guidance to governments on how to prevent this violence and how to protect workers from stigma and retaliation so they can speak up and get the justice they deserve.”

On June 12, 2020, Uruguay became the first country to ratify the convention, which will enter into force with the second ratification. Argentina, Belgium, Fiji, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Namibia, the Philippines, South Africa, Spain, and Uganda have signaled their intention to ratify. Countries that ratify agree to align their national laws to the treaty’s standards and will be periodically reviewed for compliance by the ILO.

The #MeToo movement and attacks on health workers in the context of the coronavirus pandemic have highlighted the urgency of strong measures to prevent work-related violence and harassment and to ensure that survivors have access to services and remedies. Human Rights Watch has documented violence and harassment at work around the world, including in agriculture, domestic work, education, fishing, the garment industry, health, journalism, mining, public office, and the military.

The ILO has found that many existing laws exclude the workers most exposed to violence, for example domestic workers, farmworkers, and those in precarious employment. A 2018 World Bank report found that 59 out of 189 economies had no specific legal provisions covering sexual harassment at work.

The treaty sets out minimum obligations for governments, including ensuring comprehensive national laws against harassment and violence at work and prevention measures such as information campaigns and identifying high-risk sectors. It also requires enforcement – such as inspections and investigations – and access to remedies for victims, including complaint systems, whistleblower protections, services, and compensation.

The treaty covers workers, trainees, workers whose employment has been terminated, job seekers, and job applicants, among others, and applies to both formal and informal

sectors, public and private. It also includes a requirement to address violence and harassment involving third parties, such as clients, customers, or service providers.

The treaty recognizes that violence and harassment go beyond the physical workplace and includes other activities related to work, such as commutes and offsite work events. It also obliges governments to ensure employers have workplace policies and prevention measures addressing violence and harassment.

The treaty addresses gender-based violence specifically, including the intersection of domestic violence and work, and the steps governments should take, including protections so that domestic violence survivors can seek help without losing their jobs.

Several global workers' and women's rights organizations are campaigning to promote these standards and urging governments to ratify the treaty quickly. These include global trade unions such as the International Trade Union Confederation, the International Domestic Workers' Federation, and several other global unions as well as the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence Campaign and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing.

### **Promising steps highlighted in the report include:**

- In Zambia, the definition of the workplace extends beyond formal worksites and includes "any place where the employees work or are likely to work, or which they frequent or are likely to frequent in the course of their employment or incidental to it."
- India's law governing sexual harassment extends workplace protection to students, third parties visiting a workplace such as customers or clients, and those directly or indirectly employed, including trainees, apprentices, and volunteers. The law applies both to the organized and unorganized sectors.
- The state of New York in the United States requires public employers to develop and implement programs to prevent and minimize workplace violence, including through written policy statements, conducting risk evaluations, creating a prevention program, providing training for employees, documenting incidents, and reviewing all cases annually.
- In Finland, the 2002 Occupational Safety and Health Act requires work to be arranged so that, "the threat of violence and incidents of violence are prevented as far as possible." This includes providing appropriate safety equipment and arrangements, ensuring that employees have ways to summon help, and avoiding hazards or risks when employees are working alone.
- Puerto Rico allows an employer to request a protection order for an employee against visitors if the employee has been a victim of domestic violence in the workplace.
- The Philippines and New Zealand provide for 10 days of paid leave for domestic violence survivors to pursue legal proceedings, leave their partners, and protect themselves and their children.
- Spain provides women workers who are victims of gender-based violence the right to a reduction and reorganization of working time, to move their location, and to suspend the employment contract.
- Colombia and Costa Rica have laws and directives addressing workplace violence that instruct labor inspectors on how to handle victim complaints in cases of workplace harassment.
- German law permits employees to refuse to work without losing pay if the employer does not take appropriate steps to stop harassment in the workplace.

"Workers who are marginalized – because of their sex, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or migration status, among other characteristics – are often at

greatest risk of violence and have the least access to any help,” Varia said. “Ratifying the convention and carrying it out is a major opportunity for countries to end these abuses and promote safety and dignity at work.”

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## **WORLD: Gender lens essential to addressing linked climate change and security crises, urges joint UN report**

***As COVID-19 layers crisis upon crisis in communities affected by climate change and conflict, gender-responsive action is urgently needed.***

UNDP (09.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2XKm9HN> - As countries reel from the devastating social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, gender inequality is shaping the experience of crisis, as well as prospects for resilience and recovery.

A new report – [Gender, Climate & Security: Sustaining Inclusive Peace on the Frontlines of Climate Change](#) – by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), UN Women, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UNDPPA) reveals the close links between gender, climate, and security, and shows that women on the frontlines of climate action are playing a vital role in conflict prevention and sustainable, inclusive peace.

Communities affected by conflict and climate change face a double crisis. The pandemic further compounds the impacts of climate change on food security, livelihoods, social cohesion, and security. This can undermine development gains, escalate violence, and also disrupt fragile peace processes.

Women and girls are facing disproportionate economic burdens due to different types of marginalization; gendered expectations can lead men and women to resort to violence when traditional livelihoods fail; and important socio-economic shifts can result from changes to patterns of migration.

“Unequal access to land tenure, financial resources, and decision-making power can create economic stress for entire households in times of crisis, leaving women disproportionately exposed to climate-related security risk,” said UNEP’s Executive Director, Inger Andersen. “The climate crisis stretches well beyond just climate, and tackling it effectively requires responses that address the links between gender, climate and security - we must ensure no one is left behind.”

Research supporting the report shows that in Chad, gender-based violence and structural inequality limit the capacity of communities to adapt to climate shocks. In Sudan, the growing scarcity of fertile land caused by extended droughts and rainfall fluctuation is marked by increases in local conflict between farmers and nomadic groups. Many people – mostly men – have migrated away from local villages in search of alternative livelihoods in large agricultural schemes or in nearby mines, leaving women with greater economic burdens. Other examples highlight climate-related security risks for women in urban areas, especially within informal settlements. Research from Pakistan and Sierra Leone suggest that water shortages, heat waves, and extreme weather events can create new risks of gender-based violence and deepen pervasive inequalities.

The report makes clear the urgent need for gender-responsive action to tackle these linked crises. Interventions around natural resources, the environment and climate change, for example, provide significant opportunities for women’s political and economic leadership and strengthen their contributions to peace. Sustainable natural resource programming also offers opportunities to mitigate sexual and gender-based violence in

conflict. Recognizing that peace and security, human rights, and development are interdependent is vital to forge a better future, the report argues.

"Gender inequality, climate vulnerability, and state fragility are strongly interlinked - we know, for example, that countries with higher values in one of these areas tend to score higher in the other two", said UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner. "At the same time, aid targeting initiatives that empower women and promote gender equality remains very low. The concrete examples of these types of initiatives in action showcased in this report can help spur further research and inspire more opportunities to reinforce the roles of women in peacebuilding, which is fundamental to help us achieve the Sustainable Development Goals."

"Strengthening the role of women in the management of natural resources also creates opportunities for them to act as peacebuilders and manage conflicts in non-violent manners," adds Oscar Fernández-Taranco, Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support.

Gender considerations should also be fully reflected in emerging policy and programming on climate-related security risks – not only to strengthen awareness and understanding of particular vulnerabilities, but also to highlight opportunities for leadership and inclusion of women and marginalized groups in decision-making processes.

More investment for gender equality and women's empowerment is required in fragile states, including implications on human mobility, and especially in sectors related to natural resources, where it is particularly low.

"Building back better with a gender lens means ensuring our post-COVID economies tackle the fundamental inequalities in society and end violence against women," said UN Women Executive Director, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka. "Women are a powerful force to rebuild societies more securely, from providing food and shelter, to generating vital income and leading sustainable change."

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## **WORLD: The sexual-health supply chain is broken**

***Condoms, birth control, and other items are harder to get in the developing world because of the pandemic. That is putting lives at risk.***

By Anna Louie Sussman

The Atlantic (08.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2UrVKMI> - It took Dimos Sakellaridis about six years to build Kiss condoms into one of Nigeria's top brands, with approximately 91 million sold in 2019. The prophylactics are available in shops, markets, and kiosks across the country, and a combination of irreverent advertising, a growing population of young people, and a greater understanding of reproductive health within Nigeria has meant his sales have steadily risen.

But if he can't get a shipment of 12 million condoms (and 4 million packs of birth-control pills) out of the Lagos port soon, those stocks will run out. And unfortunately for Sakellaridis, it makes no difference to the customs authorities, who are working their way through a backlog of containers, that ordinary Nigerians depend on Sakellaridis's stranded cargo to prevent unwanted pregnancies and stop the spread of sexually transmitted infections. All he can do is wait—and he is not alone.

Sakellaridis is the Nigeria country director for DKT International, one of the largest family-planning providers in the world. Since mid-March, when measures taken to

contain the coronavirus cut work at the Lagos port, the process of clearing incoming cargo stretched from two to three weeks to more than three months. During that time, DKT's central warehouse ran out of condoms.

DKT's struggles highlight the fragility of a global supply chain in which essential goods and medicines are often sourced from a small handful of countries whose competitive advantage has allowed them to dominate various steps of the production cycle. This is not a challenge limited to reproductive health: All over the world, manufacturing, shipping, and logistics have slowed or halted altogether as governments have closed factories, grounded flights, and sealed off borders in response to the coronavirus. But whereas for most goods, this represents little more than an inconvenience, when it comes to vital sexual- and reproductive-health commodities, such breakdowns can put lives at risk.

Women who trust a specific brand of contraceptive might find it out of stock at the pharmacy. Couples stuck at home, unable to locate the inexpensive condoms they normally buy, might skip protection. Central warehouses may not be able to supply the mobile clinic vans that travel to rural communities unserved by the national public-health system. The results of a disrupted supply chain in this field could be disastrous. The United Nations Population Fund, or UNFPA, the organization's sexual- and reproductive-health agency, has flagged stockout risks over the coming months in 46 countries. Marie Stopes International, which provides family-planning services in 37 low-income countries, has warned that up to 9.5 million women and girls are at risk of losing access to contraception and safe abortion services, which could result in 1.3 to 3 million unintended pregnancies, and 1.2 to 2.7 million unsafe abortions. This could, in turn, lead to an estimated 5,000 to 11,000 pregnancy-related deaths.

The effects will differ depending on the individual, Sarah Shaw, the head of advocacy at Marie Stopes, told me—poor people who rely on free services will be worse off than their wealthier peers in the same country, and women in countries with robust health systems will have a wider array of options if a drugstore runs out of condoms. Although high-income countries that manufacture their own drugs import large quantities of active pharmaceutical ingredients, or APIs, from China, meaning they faced a squeeze on supplies at the height of the pandemic, manufacturers are likely to prioritize these more profitable markets over lower-income ones.

At DKT, which distributes contraception and safe-abortion products in 90 mostly low- and middle-income countries, country directors will typically keep about three months' worth of inventory on hand during normal times, according to Chris Purdy, DKT's president and CEO. Even though manufacturing across Asia has come back online as the coronavirus outbreak has eased in parts of the continent, early factory closures in countries such as India, Malaysia, and China, combined with shipping delays and port congestion, has cut this margin close.

The majority of the world's condoms, for example, are made in Malaysia and Thailand, home to natural-rubber industries. The paper for cardboard condom packages then comes from China, Indonesia, and Europe, Paul Liang, the marketing director at Karex Berhad, one of the world's biggest condom producers, told me. India and China are leading manufacturers of generic pharmaceutical products and cheap drugs, although many Indian drug companies rely on Chinese firms for APIs. Products made in one country might also be shipped to a lab in another for quality testing. Once they're ready for export, they travel by air or sea, depending on the size of the shipment, the urgency of demand, and other factors. Today, many of these travel routes are closed down, severely restricted, or drastically more expensive.

Even without the coronavirus pandemic, which has spurred new quarantine measures and waiting periods, these products were typically subject to inspection once they landed. In Uganda, for example, condoms must be sampled and tested by a regulator. In Kenya, each three-pack of condoms carries a small sticker saying they've met regulatory standards before it can be sold to consumers, which requires unpacking every shipment for manual labeling. Reduced manpower as a result of social distancing and evening curfews in Kenya meant that labeling that normally takes two weeks stretched to more than a month. Had the process been delayed any further, Lauren Archer, the DKT Kenya and Uganda country director, told me, her team would have run out of stock.

Companies such as DKT struggle even to substitute identical products in times of need: Importing countries register drugs, such as injectable contraception or the abortion pill, and medical devices, such as condoms or kits used to provide abortions, by manufacturer and country of origin, not just based on the active ingredient or product category. The process of registering a new drug or medical device with the appropriate national agency can take anywhere from six months to several years. "Let's say you have a stockout from China. It's not a simple matter of 'Well, okay, I'm just going to go buy from India now,'" Purdy told me. "You can't simply switch to a new manufacturer without undergoing re-registration."

Large parts of the world do not have domestic manufacturing capacity for these vital health products, leaving them deeply vulnerable to any glitch or disruption to the supply chain. Even countries that have some domestic capacity are not wholly self-sufficient: Iran does have pharmaceutical production, but does not make its own intrauterine devices, or IUDs, the long-acting reversible contraceptives that prevent pregnancy for several years at a time. When I spoke with Purdy at the end of May, a container holding 50,000 IUDs bound for Iran had been stuck in a Dubai port for nearly three months.

The major global organizations that buy and distribute these goods have tried to anticipate and prevent stocks from running out. Purdy encouraged DKT's country directors to place large orders back in January after a colleague in China sent him photos of empty streets and supermarket shelves scraped clean. In mid-March, Eric Dupont, the head of UNFPA's procurement-services branch, implemented fast-track procedures for bidding on important reproductive-health products and gave national offices greater powers to order what they needed. Yet many of these contracts have yet to be delivered: Marie Stopes International's orders placed in January are still en route, traveling by sea.

These organizations have been using every tool at their disposal to get products to countries where they're needed, and to push them out from central warehouses. The UNFPA used its diplomatic clout to win an export waiver for Indian-made goods. It is also working more with the World Food Programme, which is managing a global logistics cluster on behalf of multiple U.N. agencies, and the UNFPA also joined with a dozen other U.N. agencies to make a joint tender for personal protective equipment.

On a more local level, DKT's logistics partners in Uganda, having been able to obtain just a few of the limited number of permits released by the government for transit vans, are supplementing their transport network with motorbikes, though these can carry only small amounts of goods, Archer said. In Madagascar, Marie Stopes has been using its fleet of buses to pick up maternity patients—while complying with government-required social distancing—and take them to clinics, after public transport was shut down, according to Shaw. Manuelle Hurwitz, the director of the programs division at the International Planned Parenthood Federation, told me that one way to help meet demand was through calling for policy or regulatory changes, such as classifying family-planning and sexual-health services as "essential," and allowing telemedicine. IPPF's member association in India, for example, is using a hybrid model of telemedicine for counseling and follow-up care and clinic visits scheduled at intervals to keep a safe distance between

clients. “There’s adaptations like that evolving all the time, but the reality is we’re not reaching as many women,” Shaw said.

These extra efforts have strained organizational budgets. To ensure the consistent flow of supplies—both downstream to pharmacies, clinics, and supermarkets by extending credit to his buyers; and upstream by placing large orders that will take months to arrive—Purdy said he has had to float more than the \$10 million a month that he normally does, forcing him to dig into DKT’s endowment (a \$1.9 million grant from the Swedish government helped defray some of these extra costs). Others I spoke with said they were also spending more on the purchase of supplies—both sexual- and reproductive-health products and PPE for staff.

“I never thought in a million years I would be getting requests to say, ‘Can we use our advocacy budget to buy hand sanitizer?’” Shaw said.

While manufacturing has resumed in India, China, and Malaysia, factories there face long backlogs of orders. New safety measures such as thrice-daily sanitization mean that production will be slow, Liang said, and he is still dealing with interruptions in supplies. Because of restrictions on movement and on large gatherings, many people still won’t get the care they need, or will have to adjust their contraceptive method to avoid doctor’s visits. Shaw said that in the short term, women in the developing world are likely to shift from highly effective long-acting reversible contraceptives such as injectables, implants, and IUDs, to condoms or oral contraceptive pills. These methods typically leave more room for human error, because they must be taken daily or used correctly every time for the highest efficacy.

All of this means that in a few months’ time, there may well be an increase in demand for abortion care. “Whether we’ll be able to meet that demand,” Hurwitz said, “is something else.”

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## **WORLD: Countries need to do more to stop harmful marketing of breast-milk substitutes, says UN**

***Despite efforts to stop the harmful promotion of breast-milk substitutes, countries are still falling short in protecting parents from misleading information, according to a new UN report released Wednesday.***

UN News (27.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2Y29KxB> - Titled [Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes: National Implementation of the International Code – Status report 2020](#), the study highlights the need for stronger legislation to protect families from false claims about the safety of breast-milk substitutes or aggressive marketing practices, findings that take on increased importance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The UN World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the International Baby Food Action Network collaborated in the report’s publication.

### ***Impact of aggressive marketing***

“The aggressive marketing of breast-milk substitutes, especially through health professionals that parents trust for nutrition and health advice, is a major barrier to improving newborn and child health worldwide,” says Francesco Branca, Director of WHO’s Department of Nutrition and Food Safety.

“Health care systems must act to boost parent’s confidence in breastfeeding without industry influence so that children don’t miss out on its lifesaving benefits.”

WHO and UNICEF encourage women to continue to breastfeed during the pandemic, even if they have confirmed or suspected COVID-19, as evidence indicate it is unlikely that COVID-19 would be transmitted through breastfeeding. “The numerous benefits of breastfeeding substantially outweigh the potential risks of illness associated with the virus,” the authors find.

Of the 194 countries analyzed, 136 have in place some form of legal measure related to the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and subsequent resolutions adopted by the World Health Assembly. While 44 countries have strengthened their regulations on marketing over the past two years, only 79 countries prohibit the promotion of breast-milk substitutes in health facilities, and only 51 have provisions banning the distribution of free or low-cost supplies within the health care system.

Further, only 19 countries have banned the sponsorship of professional association meetings by manufacturers of breast-milk substitutes, which include infant formula, follow-up formula and growing up milks marketed for use by infants and children up to 36-months old.

### ***Trained healthcare professionals know best***

WHO and UNICEF recommend that babies be fed nothing but breast milk for their first six months, after which they should continue breastfeeding – as well as eating other nutritious and safe foods – until two years of age, or beyond.

Babies who are exclusively breastfed are 14 times less likely to die than those who are not, the authors stress. Yet, only 41 per cent of infants 0–6 months old are exclusively breastfed, a rate WHO Member States have committed to increase to at least 50 per cent by 2025.

Inappropriate marketing of breast-milk substitutes continues to undermine efforts to improve breastfeeding rates. Measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, such as physical distancing, meanwhile hamper community counselling and mother-to-mother support services for breastfeeding – leaving an opening for the breast-milk substitute industry to capitalize on the crisis.

“We must, more than ever, step up efforts to ensure that every mother and family receive the guidance and support they need from a trained health care worker to breastfeed their children, right from birth, everywhere,” stressed UNICEF Chief of Nutrition Victor Aguayo.

The Code bans all forms of promotion of breast-milk substitutes, including advertising, gifts to health workers and distribution of free samples. Labels cannot make nutritional and health claims or include images that idealize infant formula. Instead, labels must carry messages about the superiority of breastfeeding over formula and the risks of not breastfeeding.

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## **WORLD: COVID-19 sparks urgency around justice for women, new report calls for action**

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***A new report documents major challenges to women's access to justice in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and puts forth recommendations to accelerate action and push back against threats to progress.***

IDLO (21.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2M21N62> - The COVID-19 pandemic escalates threats to women's access to justice according to a new joint report, [Justice for Women Amidst COVID-19](#), released today by UN Women, IDLO, UNDP, UNODC, World Bank, Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies and supported by the Elders.

Curtailed access to justice institutions, rising intimate partner violence, growing injustice for women workers – including those on the frontlines of the crisis – and discriminatory laws are some of the major risks to women's lives and livelihoods associated with COVID-19.

The report documents emerging challenges and pre-existing gender justice gaps that have been exacerbated by the pandemic – not least an alarming upsurge in domestic violence after lockdowns were announced. Estimates suggest that roughly 2.73 billion women around the world live in countries where stay-at-home orders are in place, which sharply heightens the risk of intimate partner violence.

“Formal and informal spaces which afforded women appropriate safeguards are quickly shrinking”, says Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka. “Thankfully, both state and non-state actors have galvanized into action as seen in the smart and accessible interventions emerging in several countries. Some women however remain unsafe and invisible due to the digital divide. Forging private and public sector partnerships during the pandemic can ensure that all women have access to mobile phones. Justice systems can no longer be static: we need to begin to explore more sustainable ways of justice delivery, such as for example, optimizing interim orders to prevent rights violations. Furthermore, innovative parliamentary business must be pursued to ensure that the estimated 2.5 million women and girls affected by discriminatory laws are fully protected.”

“We cannot let gender equality and women's rights be among the casualties of COVID-19”, states Jan Beagle, Director-General of IDLO. “Now more than ever, it is imperative for justice institutions to address the needs of women and girls and deliver people-centered justice. The current pandemic has brought to the forefront the staggeringly wide gap of injustice and inequality. It is more than just a public health and economic emergency, it is also a moral crisis – where those who are already excluded are further marginalized and exposed to heightened dangers. As the risk of gender-based violence continues to grow during the pandemic, and the ability of justice institutions to effectively deliver services is diminished, it is of utmost priority to forge innovative ways to support women's access to justice and empower them to realize their rights.”

While the health sector is at the epicenter of the pandemic, the resilience of the justice sector and its ability to deliver justice for women has been brought into sharp focus as the reality of the global crisis sets in.

There is serious concern that gains made on gender equality will be rolled back, including through delays in reversing discriminatory laws, the enactment of new laws and the implementation of existing legislation.

The crisis particularly affects vulnerable groups of women, including those who are forcibly displaced, deprived of liberty or lack a legal identity, and the impact is compounded by the digital divide according to the report.

At a time when digital connectivity is more important than ever to access life-saving information and justice services, women are 20 per cent less likely to own a smartphone and 20 per cent less likely to access the internet from mobile phones than men, bringing into question the extent to which violations of women's rights can be addressed during the pandemic.

The report cautions that if urgent action is not undertaken, the effects of COVID - 19 are likely to derail the fragile progress made towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including SDGs 5 on gender equality and 16 on peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

As the international community races to respond to the risks of a slowdown in the wake of the pandemic, the report presents a global synthesis of the state of justice systems in connection with women's justice needs and highlights innovative interventions underway in many parts of the world.

Calling for a fresh wave of momentum, *Justice for Women Amidst COVID-19* urges justice leaders and all stakeholders to take action to increase justice for women and girls during the global health emergency.

"Countries have saved lives by shutting down economies to prevent the spread of COVID-19 but we now need concerted action to ensure that they do not lose hard-won development gains," says UNDP Administrator, Achim Steiner. "As the United Nations moves quickly to support the socio-economic recovery of countries around the world, it is crucial that we have a better understanding of where support is needed most – particularly when it comes to access to justice for women."

Liv Tørres, Director, Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies states: "Without decisive action, the meagre progress we have made on women's rights and gender equality over the past decades will be undermined. The justice gap for women is growing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We see an increase in the number of justice problems that women face, due to lockdowns and economic hardship. Simultaneously, the capacity to resolve these justice problems is decreasing. The pandemic is making our gender disparities abundantly clear, reinforces them but also shows us how they can be rectified by policy action. This report is a call for action."

"COVID-19 is public health crisis as well as a socio-economic catastrophe," says Graça Machel, Deputy-Chair of The Elders and Founder of The Graça Machel Trust. "It exacerbates existing gender inequalities and undermines women's rights and liberties. Women's voices and leadership must be at the core of the response to the pandemic and beyond. This new report sets out important findings and recommendations which I urge the highest levels of political power to take seriously."

*Justice for Women Amidst COVID-19* was developed by a cohort of international organizations, led by UN Women, the International Development Law Organization (IDLO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), World Bank, Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, and supported by The Elders.

It builds on the 2019 *Justice for Women* report, jointly produced by the High-level Group on Justice for Women, which was co-convened by UN Women, IDLO, the World Bank, and Pathfinders. The report identifies the common justice problems women face, makes the case for investment and recommends strategies to accelerate action around justice for women.

## **WORLD: 5 actions to help bring the most marginalized girls back to school after COVID-19**

By Robert Jenkins and Rebecca Winthrop

Brookings (15.05.2020) - <https://brook.gs/2LSe9xH> - The past two decades have been marked by outstanding gains in girls' education worldwide, with the number of girls out of school dropping by 79 million. We cannot risk rolling back this progress. For some children, the impact of COVID-19 will be temporary. But for others, this pandemic will be devastating and will alter the course of their lives.

As we saw during the Ebola crisis, girls are particularly vulnerable when schools close for long periods of time. A recent report estimates that 10 million more secondary school-age girls could be out of school after this initial wave of the COVID-19 crisis has passed. Evidence shows that prolonged school closure can also result in increased sexual abuse and teenage pregnancies. Further, girls from the poorest communities are likely to miss out on remote learning strategies, either because access is limited or because the burden of care often falls on women.

Now, in the face of this pandemic, more than 70 percent of students around the world are still affected by nationwide school closures—or more than 1.26 billion children and youth. While we are just beginning to understand the socioeconomic impact, experiences from Ebola show us that girls will be among the hardest hit.

For many adolescent girls, especially those from low-income countries and the poorest communities, access to education was already a challenge even before COVID-19. A recent UNICEF report shows that nearly one in three adolescent girls from the poorest households around the world have never been to school, and estimates show that only 25 percent of the poorest girls in low-income countries complete primary school. Emergencies exacerbate preexisting inequalities and intensify the existing learning crisis.

Together, this data and lessons learned from our past experience tell us that we'll need to do more than simply reopen classrooms to make it possible for the poorest and most marginalized girls to return to school. We have a once-in-a-lifetime chance to transform education and reimagine the way students learn, so that when schools reopen, they are more gender-responsive and inclusive, help all students to learn, look after all students' health and well-being, and are digitally connected.

Drawing on existing evidence, including the "What Works in Girls' Education" Brookings book, and on-the-ground know-how, we recommend governments and their partners take the following five steps to ensure marginalized girls, alongside boys, can continue their education.

### **1. Lift financial barriers that prevent girls from going to school and that are likely to increase as a result of COVID-19 economic impacts.**

The pandemic is hitting poorer families the hardest. A recent study in Kenya revealed that 68 percent of respondents had skipped a meal or eaten less as a direct result of COVID-19. The economic impact on families and communities leaves adolescent girls at higher risk of child marriage, sexual exploitation, and child labor. Waiving school and examination fees could facilitate girls' return to school. Other strategies, such as cash transfers for the most marginalized girls, have also proven effective. Following Ebola, the Sierra Leone government waived tuition and examination fees for all learners for two academic years to motivate parents and caregivers to send children back to school. Additionally, in Ghana, keeping girls safe and learning is a priority during school closures. The Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection will increase cash transfers under

the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) Program for extremely poor households across Ghana, facilitating girls' return to school in communities hard hit by the economic impact of COVID-19.

## **2. Scale gender-responsive distance education to reach the most marginalized girls.**

Distance learning strategies are essential during and after COVID-19, especially for the most marginalized girls and boys. While a recent Brookings report shows that currently 90 percent of high-income countries are using remote learning strategies to continue education, only 25 percent of low-income countries are doing so—and then largely through television and radio. There is an opportunity for countries to transform how they reach out-of-school girls and boys, even after the pandemic is over, by designing and scaling remote learning programs using appropriate technology. But it will be essential for these programs to take a gender-focused lens. Marginalized girls have less access to technology, so the design and deployment will need to be especially sensitive to working with and for girls to address these gaps. Additionally, any safety and violence risks that could be posed by girls' participation in remote learning must be identified and protection approaches incorporated, including digital safeguarding flows in tech platforms

For example, in Vietnam alone, nearly 44,000 schools from preprimary to upper secondary were closed to prevent COVID-19 spread, affecting more than 21 million children. In trying to reach every child with learning opportunities the government has seen evidence that income and geography continue to be barriers for distance education and that there is very limited data to show the differential effects of school closures on girls versus boys. UNICEF is working with the government to better understand gender differences in access and learning through distance education so that this pandemic becomes an opportunity for improving the gender-responsiveness of distance education at scale.

## **3. Intensify community mobilization and support for girls' education, including for pregnant girls and those who were out of school before the COVID-19 crisis.**

Back-to-school campaigns must include targeted messages for communities and caregivers to actively engage them in supporting girls going back to school. Messages must be contextualized, culturally relevant, and effective at changing pervasive and harmful gender norms that hold girls back. Communities must monitor girls' attendance once schools reopen, through school management committees and parent and teacher associations, and support their distance learning in the interim.

Ensuring that girls can access learning materials online and offline during school closures, and that families remain committed to girls' education, is key. For example, in Guatemala, UNICEF is working with the government to support communities in remote areas with poor connectivity and no electricity by providing printed material, TV, and radio messaging, and GIFs via mobile phones that depict both boys and girls helping with domestic chores, and survivor-centered guidance for adults to provide psychosocial support to victims of gender-based violence. This large-scale campaign is accompanied by distribution of baskets that include basic groceries and gender-responsive learning activities.

In Sierra Leone, the COVID-19 crisis forced a reassessment of policies that excluded pregnant girls from attending school. Learning from this experience, Sierra Leone's minister of basic and senior secondary education recently issued a new policy on "radical inclusion" and "comprehensive safety," allowing pregnant girls and adolescent mothers to attend school, take exams, and learn safely once schools reopened.

#### **4. Prioritize girls' safety and protection.**

During the 2014–2016 Ebola epidemic, girls were disproportionately affected by gender-based violence, resulting in a spike in adolescent pregnancies and thousands of adolescent girls unable to complete their education. We have already seen that violence against women and girls has increased during COVID-19 lockdowns. Governments must prioritize measures to protect girls from gender-based violence, early marriage and pregnancy to facilitate their return to school. A couple of examples of rapid responses to keeping girls safe and learning come from Jordan and Cote d'Ivoire.

The government of Jordan, in partnership with UNICEF and the U.K. government, has responded with a set of comprehensive policies including psychosocial support for girls through the nonformal education system, and teachers' professional development in life skills education and effective ways to support victims of violence. More than 180,000 children have benefited from these programs so far. In Cote d'Ivoire, with support from UNICEF, the government launched a nationwide distance learning program, "Mon école à la maison," or "My school at home." Under this system, teachers, mothers' groups, community health workers, and community leaders track how the pandemic is affecting students and families, and offer insights on who may need protection from gender-based violence, child marriage, early pregnancy, or other threats.

#### **5. Ensure meaningful participation for adolescent girls.**

While we continue to highlight the disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on adolescent girls and young women, we must also recognize their creativity, innovative solutions, and effective partnership in shaping the response and recovery. Adolescent girls and boys can be agents of change in their communities, but for this to happen, the education system needs to intentionally ensure equity of voice and opportunity of participation for all adolescent girls. An education system that recognizes that girls' voices are valuable and allows for their meaningful participation contributes towards girls' and women's empowerment.

Innovative approaches can help to highlight girls' voices. For example, Plan International utilizes a "photovoice" approach to capture what adolescent girls in the Solomon Islands identify as the barriers preventing them from completing secondary education. These photos and their accompanying captions are featured in two youth-led reports: "Our Education, Our Future" and "Stronger Together." Giving voice to the unheard and raising their voices in chorus on local and global platforms is inspiring.

Without urgent action to remove barriers to girls' education, this health crisis could become a children's rights crisis by denying students their right to learn. Now is the time for governments to reimagine education systems so that girls and boys have equal opportunity to attend school, or access quality learning remotely.

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### **WORLD: Joint press statement: Protecting sexual and reproductive health and rights and promoting gender-responsiveness in the COVID-19 crisis**

Government Offices of Sweden (06.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3brcwBo> - We, the Ministers of South Africa, Sweden, Argentina, Australia, Albania, Belgium, Bolivia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cabo Verde, Canada, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Fiji, France, Germany, Greece, Guinea, Italy, Latvia, Lebanon, Liberia, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Namibia, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland and the United

Kingdom, are honored to issue this joint statement on behalf of the people and governments of 59 countries: Albania, Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bolivia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Cabo Verde, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Ecuador, Estonia, Fiji, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Guinea, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lebanon, Liberia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Mexico, Moldova, Montenegro, Namibia, Netherlands, North Macedonia, New Zealand, Norway, Peru, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Serbia, South Africa, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Tunisia, Tuvalu, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Ukraine and Uruguay.

Humanity is confronted with the unprecedented threat of COVID-19. Around the world, the pandemic is having a devastating impact on health systems, economies and the lives, livelihood and wellbeing of all, particularly older people. Responding effectively to this fast-growing pandemic requires solidarity and cooperation among all governments, scientists, civil society actors and the private sector.

COVID-19 affects women and men differently. The pandemic makes existing inequalities for women and girls, as well as discrimination of other marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities and those in extreme poverty worse and risk impeding the realization of human rights for women and girls. Participation, protection and potential of all women and girls must be at the center of response efforts. These efforts must be gender-responsive and consider different impacts surrounding detection, diagnosis and access to treatment for all women and men.

The restrictive measures designed to limit the spread of the virus around the world, increase the risk of domestic violence, including intimate partner violence. As health and social protection as well as legal systems that protect all women and girls under normal circumstances are weakened or under pressure by the COVID-19, specific measures should be implemented to prevent violence against women and girls. The emergency responses should ensure that all women and girls who are refugees, migrants or internally displaced are protected. Sexual and reproductive health needs, including psychosocial support services, and protection from gender-based violence, must be prioritized to ensure continuity. We must also assume responsibility for social protection and ensure adolescent health, rights and wellbeing during schools close-down. Any restrictions to the enjoyment of human rights should be prescribed by law, and in accordance with international law and rigorously assessed.

We support the active participation and leadership of women and girls at all levels of decision-making, including at community level, through their networks and organizations, to ensure efforts and response are gender-responsive and will not further discriminate and exclude those most at risk.

It is crucial that leaders recognize the central role of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in health emergencies and the need for robust health systems to save lives. In this context, sexual health services are essential. We recommit to the immediate implementation of the UHC political declaration by all. Funding sexual and reproductive health and rights should remain a priority to avoid a rise in maternal and newborn mortality, increased unmet need for contraception, and an increased number of unsafe abortions and sexually transmitted infections.

Around the world, midwives, nurses and community health workers are essential to contain COVID-19 and they require personal protective equipment. Safe pregnancy and childbirth depend on all these health workers, adequate health facilities, and strict adherence to infection prevention. Respiratory illnesses in pregnant women, particularly COVID-19 infections, must be priority due to increased risk of adverse outcomes. As our national and international supply chains are impacted by this pandemic, we recommit to

providing all women and girls of reproductive age with reproductive health commodities. And we call on governments around the world to ensure full and unimpeded access to all sexual and reproductive health services for all women and girls.

We welcome the multilateral efforts, including by the UN, including UNFPA and UN Women, WHO, the World Bank and IMF, and regional development banks, as well as the G7 and G20 declarations, towards a coherent and global response to COVID-19. We encourage them all in their efforts with national governments and other partners to ensure an effective response and assurance of the continuation of essential health services and rights.

We must coordinate our efforts in this global health crisis. We support the UN General Assembly resolution entitled Global Solidarity to fight COVID-19. And we encourage all governments, the private sector, civil society, philanthropists and others to join us in supporting the emergency response, particularly in the most vulnerable countries, and to give full effect to the global commitment to universal access to health care.

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## **WORLD: It is time for the world to start caring for the caregivers**

***The ongoing coronavirus pandemic underlines the urgent need for safety nets for domestic workers.***

By Nisha Varia

Al Jazeera (01.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2A1rBN5> - Few workers have cause to celebrate May 1, International Workers' Day, this year. COVID-19 has been accompanied by another pandemic - of job loss and economic insecurity. Domestic workers, primarily women, have particularly precarious jobs and often do not qualify for government support.

In mid-March, as New Yorkers prepared for a mandatory lockdown, a person posted on my town's Facebook group asking what type of protective equipment she should provide to her house cleaner. Replies came fast and furious. "Clean your own home and pay them anyway!" "Cancel and pay!" But in many other communities, and around the world, the response is different.

Domestic workers' organisations and the media are reporting devastating stories of domestic workers catapulted into economic crisis across every region. Faced with lockdowns, social distancing restrictions, and in some cases their own economic hardship, many employers have dismissed their domestic workers or suspended them without pay. The loss of income is devastating for many domestic workers who may have little or no savings.

Others, especially live-in domestic workers on migrant visas such as those in the Middle East, might find themselves with extra responsibilities and longer hours, with children out of school and other household members at home.

The International Labour Organization estimates that there are 67 million domestic workers globally and that 80 percent of them are women. Yet 90 percent of them are excluded from protections such as paid sick leave and unemployment benefits. This is particularly the case in Asia, Latin America and Africa, where the largest numbers of domestic workers are concentrated.

Despite this bleak picture, there are also promising examples of action by private employers, governments and labour groups to create safety nets for this vital group of workers.

In South Africa, domestic workers who are registered with the government are provided six weeks of paid sick leave in a three-year period, and are covered by the Unemployment Insurance Act, which provides up to 238 days of unemployment benefits. Gaps remain - those workers who are not formally registered with the government cannot access these benefits.

France uses a voucher system for social security safety nets and paid leave for domestic workers, easing administrative formalities for employers and contributing to relatively widespread coverage.

A World Bank compilation of emergency relief measures during the pandemic shows that many exclude domestic workers entirely. But some countries are taking steps toward inclusion. Argentina's president, Alberto Fernandez, issued an executive order providing approximately \$155 to domestic workers and other low-wage workers as emergency financial relief.

Spain extended unemployment benefits for the first time to domestic workers on March 31. Registered domestic workers can receive 70 percent of one month's salary if their hours have been reduced or they lost their jobs since the lockdown began. This benefit is smaller than for other workers and not enough to sustain workers through an indefinite crisis but is a step towards bringing domestic workers' benefits closer in alignment to those of other workers.

Workers' organisations are campaigning to end these gaps, pressing governments to include domestic workers in their relief measures. They are using social media and other means to urge employers to continue paying domestic workers even when they cannot work due to social distancing restrictions. In Brazil, the National Federation of Domestic Workers and Themis, a gender equality group, is campaigning for employers to suspend domestic workers with pay or to provide them with adequate protective equipment. Their high-profile webinar explained domestic workers' rights, with speakers including former President Dilma Rousseff.

In the United States, the National Domestic Workers Alliance is well on its way to raising \$4m to distribute to domestic workers. While domestic workers may qualify for economic relief varying by state, a significant proportion are undocumented migrants who cannot access government benefits.

Domestic workers perform essential work, caring for the most important parts of peoples' lives - our children, our parents, our homes. Once restrictions lift, employers would do well to remember how much they missed these services.

These caregivers deserve safety nets on par with other workers and treatment with dignity. The few positive models should become the new norm.

If you are an employer, pay your domestic worker full wages during lockdowns. If you are a politician, push for the full inclusion of domestic workers in emergency relief funds, including direct cash assistance that does not require formal employment registration or migrant status.

And we should all push for longer-term change. In 2011, the International Labour Organization adopted the Domestic Workers Convention, now ratified by 29 countries.



These countries are obliged to ensure that domestic workers have legal protections on par with other workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted deep inequalities in how women's work is valued and compensated, and the dire consequences when crises hit without safety nets. But the pandemic also provides an opportunity to make long-overdue changes so that women workers emerge stronger than before. And that would give us a real cause for celebration next Labour Day.

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## **WORLD: Displaced and stateless women and girls at heightened risk of gender-based violence in the coronavirus pandemic**

UNHCR (20.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2XTxKVi> - Around the world COVID-19 is taking lives and changing communities but the virus is also inducing massive protection risks for women and girls forced to flee their homes, the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection at UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, Gillian Triggs, warned today.

"We need to pay urgent attention to the protection of refugee, displaced and stateless women and girls at the time of this pandemic. They are among those most at-risk. Doors should not be left open for abusers and no help spared for women surviving abuse and violence," said Triggs.

Confinement policies, lockdowns and quarantines adopted across the world as a response to the pandemic have led to restricted movement, reduced community interaction, the closure of services and worsening socio-economic conditions. These factors are significantly exacerbating the risks of intimate partner violence.

"Some may end up confined to their shelters and homes, trapped with their abusers without the opportunity to distance themselves or to seek in-person support."

"Others, including those without documentation or those who have lost precarious livelihoods, as a result of the economic devastation that COVID-19 has inflicted, may be forced into survival sex or child marriages by their families. Within the household, many women are also taking on increased burdens as caregivers."

For survivors of violence and those at-risk, the consequences of COVID-19 also mean limited access to life-saving support, such as psycho-social, health and security services. Imposed mobility restrictions and containment measures make it difficult for women to access help while some services, including safe shelters, have been temporarily suspended, re-purposed or closed.

"Globally, our network of UNHCR protection staff are on high alert. Our life-saving programs for women and girls subjected to violence are being adapted where possible. In some locations they are now being managed remotely by social workers with the support of trained community volunteer networks," said Triggs.

Displaced women themselves remain involved at the forefront of the response, informing their communities about the risks of violence and providing information on prevention and protective health measures. They are also supporting survivors to access available, specialized support.

UNHCR is also distributing emergency cash assistance to support survivors and women-at-risk. Action is also being coordinated across the humanitarian sector to ensure the

risks of sexual and gender-based violence are mitigated throughout all sectoral interventions, including but not limited to the emergency health response.

"To preserve lives and secure rights, Governments, together with humanitarian actors, must ensure that rising risks of violence for displaced and stateless women are taken into account in the design of national COVID-19 prevention, response and recovery plans," said Triggs.

This means ensuring critical services for survivors of gender-based violence are designated as essential and are accessible to those forcibly displaced. These include health and security services for survivors, psycho-social support services and safe shelters. Access to justice for survivors must also not be diminished.

Given the deteriorating socio-economic conditions now facing many refugee host countries, support from donors will be critically needed to preserve the operations of essential gender-based violence prevention and response services, including those provided by local, women-led organizations.

"All women and girls have the right to a life free from all forms of violence. We must stand with displaced and stateless women and girls as we reiterate the Secretary General's message and urge all governments to put all women and girls' safety first as they respond to the pandemic."

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## **WORLD: Some governments are using coronavirus to restrict women's rights**

***Classing abortions as 'non-essential' is cruel and an assault on the rights of women to bodily autonomy.***

By Claire Provost

Al Jazeera (14.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3abWECf> - Women are prominent on the front lines of the world's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Globally, most of our health workers are women. They also do most of the world's unpaid care work - even in "normal times" - taking care of relatives and helping them recuperate both from extraordinary illnesses and everyday exhaustion.

And yet, the rights of these women are coming under historic attacks even now.

Back in early March, a potentially historic bill to liberalise abortion in Argentina was an early casualty; its review has been indefinitely postponed along with many other democratic debates.

In the US, conservative states from Texas to Indiana are now banning most abortions during the pandemic. By classifying them as "non-essential", they are arguing that abortions can be delayed so that all doctors focus on COVID-19 first.

Across the Atlantic, in Poland, a bill to further restrict abortion has been revived and will be heard in Parliament next week. When this first happened, in 2016, it was met with mass protests - which are currently prohibited under coronavirus emergency measures.

Are governments and anti-abortion campaign groups taking advantage of the crisis to further restrict women's rights?

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It would not be the first time. Around the world, organised ultra-conservative movements are looking for ways to use this moment to achieve what they always wanted; fewer rights for women over their bodies.

Anti-abortion activists in Slovakia, Italy and the UK are also campaigning for abortions to be suspended during the pandemic, arguing that all resources must be focused on the coronavirus right now. They do not want women to have these rights after the crisis, either.

Others are celebrating the closure of clinics amid emergency measures that have already taken a drastic toll on access to abortion as well as contraception, HIV medicine and domestic violence services.

This pandemic is also exacerbating and shining new light on the astonishing amount of red tape that has long limited women's access to abortion in places where it has been legal for generations.

In Italy, doctors can refuse to perform abortions (and up to 90 percent do, in some areas). Medical terminations (consisting of two pills, taken across several days), are only available during the first seven weeks of pregnancy, rather than nine as in many other European countries. And these pills must be taken in hospitals, unlike in other countries, where they are also available at clinics.

These details are crucial. Abortions are by definition time-sensitive procedures. Even before the coronavirus, women in Italy struggled to access them.

Now hospitals are overwhelmed by the coronavirus and this access is increasingly impossible. As a result, women are being forced to endure unwanted pregnancies for longer and to have surgeries they do not want as medical abortions have been largely suspended.

In other countries, restrictive red tape includes mandatory counselling, waiting periods or requirements that two doctors sign off on an abortion.

Such rules vary across borders but their effect is the same; making difficult experiences for women even harder, even in "normal times", and exacerbating these challenges today.

These restrictions have other things in common, too. Neil Datta at the European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights told me they stem from compromises made when abortion was first legalised, which happened in the 1970s in Italy, for example. At that time, some doctors were still "diagnosing" women with hysteria.

In other words, there is nothing enlightened about this red tape. And what ultimately lies beneath these restrictions is the toxic, patriarchal idea that women cannot be trusted to control their own bodies and make their own choices.

Today, women's reproductive rights are being sidelined - again. For its part, the World Health Organization (WHO) has issued guidelines about domestic violence, contraception, childbirth and breastfeeding amid COVID-19.

But so far, it has been noticeably silent on safe abortion during the pandemic.

Thankfully, this is not the full picture. Big changes are also happening in response to the public health crisis and its fallout in all aspects of our lives.

Some US cities have suspended evictions of renting tenants, for example. In Iran, thousands have been released from prison. Many things that would have seemed impossible a year ago, do not any more.

And we are seeing some evidence of this for women's right to choose, too. England and Wales, for instance, have issued new rules to enable women to take medical abortion pills at home and via telemedicine appointments. Ireland and France have done similar. Germany has at least made its mandatory counselling available online and by phone.

These practical moves are victories for sensibility amid crisis. They uphold rights and public health. If women do not need to travel to multiple appointments, this can help limit the spread of coronavirus and get us out of this emergency faster.

Indeed, during crises change can happen quickly. Archaic red tape can be cut. Toxic distrust of women could give way to a new common sense that prioritises rights and health over politics. And those who were afraid of women's autonomy might not find it so scary now that they have witnessed something a lot more frightening - a historic pandemic threatening lives, health systems and democracies worldwide.

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## **WORLD: What do countries with the best coronavirus responses have in common? Women leaders**

By Avivah Wittenberg-Cox

Forbes (13.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3bnNmEJ> - Looking for examples of true leadership in a crisis? From Iceland to Taiwan and from Germany to New Zealand, women are stepping up to show the world how to manage a messy patch for our human family. Add in Finland, Iceland and Denmark, and this pandemic is revealing that women have what it takes when the heat rises in our Houses of State. Many will say these are small countries, or islands, or other exceptions. But Germany is large and leading, and the UK is an island with very different outcomes. These leaders are gifting us an attractive alternative way of wielding power. What are they teaching us?

### **Truth**

Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, stood up early and calmly told her countrymen that this was a serious bug that would infect up to 70% of the population. "It's serious," she said, "take it seriously." She did, so they did too. Testing began right from the get go. Germany jumped right over the phases of denial, anger and disingenuousness we've seen elsewhere. The country's numbers are far below its European neighbours, and there are signs they may be able to start loosening restrictions relatively soon.

### **Decisiveness**

Among the first and the fastest moves was Tsai Ing-wen's in Taiwan. Back in January, at the first sign of a new illness, she introduced 124 measures to block the spread, without having to resort to the lockdowns that have become common elsewhere. She is now sending 10 million face masks to the US and Europe. Ing-wen managed what CNN has called "among the world's best" responses, keeping the epidemic under control, still reporting only six deaths.

Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand was early to lockdown and crystal clear on the maximum level of alert she was putting the country under – and why. She imposed self-isolation on people entering New Zealand astonishingly early, when there were just 6 cases in the whole country, and banned foreigners entirely from entering soon after. Clarity and decisiveness are saving New Zealand from the storm. As of mid-April they have suffered only four deaths, and where other countries talk of lifting restrictions, Ardern is adding to them, making all returning New Zealanders quarantine in designated locations for 14 days.

### **Tech**

Iceland, under the leadership of Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir, is offering free coronavirus testing to all its citizens, and will become a key case study in the true spread and fatality rates of Covid-19. Most countries have limited testing to people with active symptoms. Iceland is going whole hog. In proportion to its population the country has already screened five times as many people as South Korea has, and instituted a thorough tracking system that means they haven't had to lockdown... or shut schools.

Sanna Marin became the world's youngest head of state when she was elected last December in Finland. It took a millennial leader to spearhead using social media influencers as key agents in battling the coronavirus crisis. Recognising that not everyone reads the press, they are inviting influencers of any age to spread fact-based information on managing the pandemic.

### **Love**

Norway's Prime Minister, Erna Solberg, had the innovative idea of using television to talk directly to her country's children. She was building on the short, 3-minute press conference that Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen had held a couple of days earlier. Solberg held a dedicated press conference where no adults were allowed. She responded to kids' questions from across the country, taking time to explain why it was OK to feel scared. The originality and obviousness of the idea takes one's breath away. How many other simple, humane innovations would more female leadership unleash?

Generally, the empathy and care which all of these female leaders have communicated seems to come from an alternate universe than the one we have gotten used to. It's like their arms are coming out of their videos to hold you close in a heart-felt and loving embrace. Who knew leaders could sound like this? Now we do.

Now, compare these leaders and stories with the strongmen using the crisis to accelerate a terrifying trifecta of authoritarianism: blame-"others", capture-the-judiciary, demonize-the-journalists, and blanket their country in I-will-never-retire darkness (Trump, Bolsonaro, Obrador, Modi, Duterte, Orban, Putin, Netanyahu...).

There have been years of research timidly suggesting that women's leadership styles might be different and beneficial. Instead, too many political organisations and companies are still working to get women to behave more like men if they want to lead or succeed. Yet these national leaders are case study sightings of the seven leadership traits men may want to learn from women.

It's time we recognised it – and elected more of it.

## **WORLD: Statement by OSCE Special Representative for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings on need to strengthen anti-trafficking efforts in a time of crisis**

OSCE (03.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2x68Fvq> - Valiant Richey, OSCE Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, today issued the following statement, in co-ordination with Albania's OSCE Chairmanship, to the OSCE participating States on the COVID-19 pandemic. He urged that, "it is precisely when our global community is convulsed by a crisis of this magnitude that our obligation to combat the exploitation of vulnerable people becomes most acute". His full statement read:

"With the spread of COVID-19, the world faces an unprecedented threat to public health, which, in turn, poses extraordinary challenges to the economic and social cohesion of all our communities. In the fight against this common enemy, many governments have taken strong preventive measures, often combined with public interventions aimed at alleviating some of the economic losses that those measures inevitably create.

Although the COVID-19 threat is universal, the negative consequences of this crisis will be disproportionately carried by the most vulnerable in our societies. Firstly, victims of trafficking face exceptional danger as entrenched systems of exploitation are thrown into disarray and traffickers seek to maintain their revenue through greater violence or new forms of exploitation. Meanwhile, access to shelters and other support structures is increasingly limited at a time when need is at its greatest. Secondly, as resources gravitate to address public health concerns, attention is diverted from deterring criminal actors, and vulnerable persons already living in precarious circumstances are now at greater risk for being swept into exploitative situations.

The consequences of the current crisis on victims are far-reaching. Trafficking for sexual exploitation is increasingly moving online where traffickers can keep their revenue intact and enhance the isolation of and control over victims, particularly women and girls, who comprise 94% of the victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. Children, at a time of school closures and potentially more hours spent online, face a greater risk of online grooming. Victims of forced labour find themselves with even fewer options for survival and less legal protection. In the case of trafficking for organ removal, one of the darkest and least addressed forms of trafficking, the impacts of COVID-19 are starting to raise alarm.

In moments of crisis, traffickers will increase their recruitment as more and more people find themselves in dire economic straits. For this reason, it is essential that governments ensure equal access to healthcare, unemployment services, and other welfare services, regardless of recent employment history or legal status, to guarantee that those who need this support the most can effectively access it. Anyone without an income or other form of support is at risk of falling into the hands of traffickers. In these chaotic times, it is vital that States do not let their guard down, but instead strengthen their anti-trafficking efforts.

Human trafficking feeds off vulnerability — in particular, gender and economic inequality — and it is a symptom of frailty in our society. It is precisely when our global community is shaken by a crisis of this magnitude that our obligation to combat the exploitation of vulnerable people becomes most acute. Where trafficking goes unchecked and impunity reigns, the rule of law is undermined and the security and safety of all citizens, especially the most vulnerable, is threatened. For this reason, combating human trafficking is not just a law enforcement responsibility. It is a human, societal and security imperative, and an urgent priority.

The COVID-19 crisis will be remembered for generations, and we have just started to see its transformative impact on our lives. Today, as in all moments of historic change, we have the opportunity to steer our future in a better direction. Inclusive programmes ensuring protection to vulnerable groups can be a powerful tool to break the cycle of exploitation and strengthen exit pathways, giving a real alternative to those in need. With the necessary attention, adequate resources and the right programmes, we can start today to build a better and safer tomorrow for all."

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## **WORLD: Protection from domestic violence urgently needed for women and children under stay-at-home orders, say OSCE officials**

OSCE (02.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2XdRZN2> - Noting a troubling rise in domestic violence in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and self-isolation guidelines in many countries, OSCE leaders called today for measures to be taken by governments to protect women and children. They said that unfortunately, for them home is not always a safe haven, as they are the most susceptible to abuse and need increased protection in these extraordinary times and urged to ensure that they are kept safe from abusers.

OSCE Secretary General Thomas Greminger said: "While dealing with the current health crisis participating States should not forget to uphold the right of women and children to live free of violence in times of families finding themselves in self-isolation. Urgent actions should be taken to address their needs and undertake measures to provide adequate protection for them."

The Secretary General of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Roberto Montella, said: "Some governments are already taking measures to counter domestic violence during the lockdown, which we hope can serve as best practices for others."

OSCE officials noted that rates of intimate partner violence can increase in times of isolation at home, while availability of support services for victims of violence has reduced.

"Far too many are subjected to mental, physical and sexual abuse, a situation that often escalates when families are under stress," said OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Special Representative on Gender Issues Hedy Fry (MP, Canada). "I urge governments across the OSCE area to increase efforts to provide safe spaces for victims of abuse, to prosecute abusers and to take other necessary measures to combat domestic violence."

The OSCE officials noted a number of steps taken to reduce the risk of domestic abuse, including public information campaigns to inform the public that women's shelters are remaining open during the coronavirus lockdown, banning the sale of alcohol as part of the effort to reduce domestic violence, and providing victims with the opportunity to report domestic violence in still-accessible locations such as pharmacies. In countries with strict lockdowns, some governments have announced that women will not be fined if they leave home to report abuse or seek safety. Governments and civil society organizations have expanded the availability of online and phone services for victims of violence.

"Combating domestic violence is the responsibility of the state. As governments seek to keep people safe from the pandemic, they need to take the potential effect of their measures on women carefully into account, and make sure that protection from both real and potential violence is a priority," said the Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic

Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir. "No one should be forced to choose between complying with the law and ensuring their own personal security, and authorities must ensure the safety of all their citizens, whether from the risk of infection or from violence in their own home."

The officials pointed to a number of OSCE resources related to gender-based violence, including an OSCE-led [Survey on Violence Against Women](#), practical guides such as the [ODIHR Guidebook on Preventing and Addressing Sexual and Gender based Violence in Places of Deprivation of Liberty](#), and [several reports](#) of the OSCE PA Special Representative on Gender Issues dealing with the topic.

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## **WORLD: UNFPA study shows limits on women's reproductive decision-making worldwide - one quarter of women cannot refuse sex**

UNFPA (01.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3bOMWqu> - Approximately a quarter of women cannot refuse sex or make their own decisions about accessing proper health care, a major international study has found. UNFPA, the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency, today released groundbreaking new research revealing how far the world has come in allowing women and girls to make informed decisions about their reproductive rights.

Most countries have strong laws to ensure women can access their sexual and reproductive health and rights. But the reality women face is often very different. UNFPA measured women's reproductive decision making in 57 countries, and legislation on sexual and reproductive health and rights in 107 countries, and the findings showed, amongst other trends, that in over 40% of the countries, women's reproductive rights are regressing.

"One woman in four in the countries we examined is not able to make her own decisions about accessing health care. This is shocking and unacceptable," said Dr. Natalia Kanem, UNFPA Executive Director. "This new research offers a comprehensive picture of the state of sexual and reproductive health and rights around the world, both in law and the lived reality of women and girls. It will help us better understand what works and pinpoint the challenges that remain with a level of detail we have not had before."

The new findings help us measure progress towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), gender equality and women's empowerment. More precisely, they cover two indicators under SDG 5 on achieving universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (Target 5.6). Indicator 5.6.1 measures women's reproductive autonomy and indicator 5.6.2 measures the legal and regulatory frameworks that exist in countries to allow people their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The key findings from the research include:

\*Only 55% of women can make their own decisions on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

\*A quarter of women are not able to make their own decisions about accessing health care.

\*Countries on average have 73% of the laws and regulations in place needed to guarantee full and equal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights.



\*Almost 100% of countries' laws and regulations guarantee access to voluntary HIV counselling and testing and protect the confidentiality of people living with HIV.

\*Many states impose legal restrictions that impede access to sexual and reproductive health and rights for certain groups - namely women and adolescents.

This research will be a crucial resource for UNFPA, governments, and partners to efficiently respond to the most pressing needs of women and girls around the world. For the first time, it allows us to identify the challenges different countries still face in the full realization of sexual and reproductive health and rights that legal frameworks may not account for.

You can access the research here: <https://www.unfpa.org/sdg-5-6>.

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## **WORLD: Global report - FGM/C: A call for a global response**

End FGM European Network (17.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3afJQvc> - Female Genital Mutilation or Cutting (FGM/C) is happening in far more countries around the world than widely acknowledged, and the number of women and girls who are affected is being woefully underestimated, finds a new global report.

FGM/C is occurring in at least 92 countries, but only 51 (55%) have specific legislation against the practice, leaving millions without adequate legal protection.

The End FGM European Network, the US Network to End FGM/C, and Equality Now have partnered to produce the report '[Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Call for a Global Response](#)', bringing together for the first time wide-ranging information on the practise and pervasiveness of FGM/C in countries not currently included in official global data.

According to figures released by UNICEF in February 2020, at least 200 million women and girls have undergone FGM/C in 31 countries worldwide. This figure only includes states where there is available data from large-scale representative surveys, incorporating 27 countries from the African continent, together with Iraq, Yemen, the Maldives, and Indonesia.

Our research has now identified at least 60 other countries where the practice of FGM/C has been documented either through indirect estimates, small-scale studies, anecdotal evidence, and media reports.

The growing body of evidence featured in our report reveals that FGM/C is taking place in Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, Europe, and North America. It also highlights key gaps in data availability and anti-FGM legislation.

FGM/C involves the partial or complete removal of external female genitalia for non-medical reasons, thereby interfering with the natural functions of girls' and women's bodies.

There are various types of FGM/C. It includes clitoridectomy, which is the partial or total removal of the clitoris, and excision, which involves the removal of the entire clitoris and the cutting of the labia minor.

In another form, known as infibulation, all external genitalia is removed and the two sides of the vulva are stitched together to leave only a small hole. Other procedures involve pricking, nicking, or in other ways damaging the female genitalia.

The procedure itself can be fatal, and data on the total number of deaths each year is unavailable. The practice has no health benefits and can have serious lifelong physical and psychological harm.

It is typically carried out on girls between infancy and age 18, with women occasionally subjected. While it is often done without anaesthetic, it is increasingly happening in medical settings performed by healthcare professionals.

Although the type and justifications for FGM/C can vary somewhat within different cultures, it is deeply rooted in gender inequality and often is a reflection of the patriarchal desire to control the sexuality of women and girls.

Despite mounting evidence demonstrating the global pervasiveness of FGM/C, levels of awareness and acknowledgement amongst government authorities and the general public remain unacceptably low.

The dearth of accurate data is enabling governments reluctant to tackle FGM/C to ignore the issue. Better statistical information is invaluable because it can help put pressure on states to take action and provides a baseline from which the scale and effectiveness of interventions can be measured.

Governments need to strengthen investment for evidence-based research and enact and enforce comprehensive laws and policies. There is also an urgent need to improve the wellbeing of survivors by providing critical support and services.

The international community and donors should bolster their global political commitment by increasing resources and investment into the provision of assistance to survivors and the empowerment of women and girls.

Dr. Ghada Khan, Network Coordinator of US End FGM/C Network said: "The global relevance of FGM/C, as highlighted in the findings of the report, once again calls for the collection and dissemination of reliable data on FGM/C prevalence across all regions, countries, and contexts in order to support FGM/C prevention efforts, and provide care and services to all women and girls who have undergone the practice worldwide."

Accurate data also assists grassroots organizations and researchers to attract funding as a lack of financial backing is a major problem hampering the work of women's rights activists.

Flavia Mwangovya, Global Lead at Equality Now said: "The stories shared by brave survivors and activists demonstrate how women across the world are uniting in their commitment to end this harmful practice, irrespective of the type of FGM involved or where it occurs. We owe it to survivors and those at risk to ensure that political commitments made by governments to end FGM are finally fulfilled."

FGM/C is recognized as a human rights violation under international human rights law. In 2012, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution to eliminate FGM/C, and in 2015, the 193 countries unanimously agreed to a new global target within the Sustainable Development Goals for the elimination of FGM/C by 2030 (SDG5).

Fiona Coyle, Director at the End FGM European Network said: "FGM must be recognized as a global issue that needs global prioritization. With only ten years to go to achieve the

goal of zero girls undergoing FGM, we have no more time to waste. We need to work across communities, countries, and continents.

Everyone everywhere is called to substantially increase efforts towards the abandonment of FGM. We need increased political will, stronger laws and policies, increased community engagement, and increased investment to truly end this practice."

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## **WORLD: States should not use religious beliefs to justify women and LGBT+ rights violations – UN expert**

OHCHR (02.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2TEwt0u> - States should repeal gender discriminatory laws grounded on religious beliefs and must address gender-based violence carried out in the name of religion by non-State actors, said a UN expert in a report presented to the Human Rights Council today.

"I firmly reject any claim that religious beliefs can be invoked as a legitimate 'justification' for violence or discrimination against women, girls or LGBT+ people. The right to freedom of religion protects individuals and not religions as such," said Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

In his report, the UN expert urges States to repeal gender-based discrimination laws, including those enacted with reference to religious considerations that criminalize adultery; criminalize persons on the basis of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity; criminalize abortion in all cases; and facilitate religious practices that violate human rights.

"Women and LGBT+ people experience discrimination and violence inflicted in the name of religion by State and non-State actors that impedes their ability to fully enjoy their human rights, including their right to freedom of religion or belief," Shaheed said.

The Special Rapporteur also expressed deep concern at the rise in political and religious campaigns, which invoke religious freedom to seek to rollback human rights that are fundamental to gender equality, at both national and international levels.

"Religious communities are not monolithic. In many religions, a plurality of self-understandings exists, some of which may be more committed than others to advancing gender equality and non-discrimination," the UN expert said.

"While religious organizations are entitled to autonomy in the administration of their affairs, such deference should be extended within a holistic conception of rights grounded in the universality, indivisibility, interdependence and inalienability of all human rights.

"States have an obligation to guarantee to everyone, including women, girls and LGBT+ people, an equal right to freedom of religion or belief, including by creating an enabling environment where pluralist and progressive self-understandings can manifest," Shaheed said.

The Special Rapporteur also presented reports on his recent country visits to the Netherlands and Sri Lanka to the Human Rights Council.

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## **WORLD: UN chief: Growing inequality for women should shame world**

By Edith M. Lederer

Associated Press (28.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3cuCPbs> - U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned Thursday that inequality for women is growing and it "should shame us all in the 21st century because it is not only unacceptable, it is stupid."

The U.N. chief said in a speech at the New School in New York that gender inequality and discrimination against women is the "one overwhelming injustice across the globe — an abuse that is crying out for attention."

"Everywhere, women are worse off than men, simply because they are women," he said, and minority, migrant, refugee and disabled women "face even greater barriers."

Guterres said gender inequality is "a stain," just like slavery and colonialism were in previous centuries.

He said young women like Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani schoolgirl who campaigned for girls' right to education after surviving being shot by Taliban militants, and Nadia Murad, the Nobel peace laureate who survived enslavement and sexual abuse by Islamic State extremists in Iraq, "are breaking barriers and creating new models of leadership."

But despite these advances, Guterres said, "the state of women's rights remains dire."

"Progress has slowed to a standstill — and in some cases, been reversed," he said. "There is a strong and relentless push back against women's rights."

Guterres pointed to violence against women "at epidemic levels," with more than one in three women experiencing violence in their lifetimes, and legal protections against rape and domestic violence "being diluted or rolled back."

The secretary-general spoke ahead of the meeting of the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women from March 9-20 which will assess implementation of the declaration and platform for action adopted by the world's nations at the U.N. women's conference in Beijing 25 years ago to achieve gender equality.

Guterres said women leaders and female public figures "face harassment, threats and abuse, online and off" and are excluded from "the top table" in government, corporations and peace negotiations.

"From the ridiculing of women as hysterical or hormonal, to the routine judgment of women based on their looks, from the myths and taboos that surround women's natural bodily functions, to mansplaining and victim-blaming — misogyny is everywhere," Guterres said.

"And the digital age could make these inequalities even more entrenched," Guterres warned.

The secretary-general said he sees five areas where achieving gender equality "will transform the world."

First, he calls for an end to "men waging war on women," noting that 137 women around the world are killed by a member of their own family every day.

The U.N. is committed to putting women at the center of conflict prevention, peacemaking, peace-building and mediation — and to increase the number of female peacekeepers, he said.

In other areas, Guterres said “macho posturing will not save our planet” but gender equality “is essential if we are to beat the climate emergency.” And he said women still earn just 77 cents for every dollar earned by men and that must be rectified to ensure equal economic rights.

As for the digital divide, Guterres said many algorithms are biased toward men, and “unless women play an equal role in designing digital technologies, progress on women’s rights could be reversed.”

Finally, the secretary-general said political representation must improve, noting that while women’s participation in parliaments around the world has doubled in the last 25 years, it’s only been “to one quarter” of members, and less than one-tenth of the world’s nations are led by women.

“Gender equality is a question of power — power that has been jealously guarded by men for millennia,” Guterres said.

“We must urgently transform and redistribute power, if we are to safeguard our future and our planet,” he said.

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## **WORLD: NATO adopts first-ever policy on preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse**

***NATO has adopted its first policy on preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse.***

NATO (30.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2uoed2S> - The policy, which applies to all personnel, makes clear NATO’s zero-tolerance approach. This robust policy defines what behaviours are unacceptable, how to prevent them, and how Allies will work collectively to ensure accountability. The policy is focused first and foremost on prevention, and this is key for protecting women and girls and all who might be at risk. By raising awareness, requiring training, and taking other steps to create an environment conducive to the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, the policy sends a clear message of enhanced protection and ensures the trust and confidence of NATO’s citizens and those of the countries in which the Alliance operates.

According to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, the policy is “another practical way in which we show our commitment to our principles and core values, including respect for human rights.”

NATO is committed to advancing gender equality and the principles of Women Peace and Security across its tasks and functions – military and civilian. This work is guided by the NATO/EAPC Policy on Women, Peace and Security and the concepts of integration, inclusiveness and integrity, which stem from the Alliance’s core values of individual liberty, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The policy was adopted by NATO Foreign Ministers in November 2019 and endorsed by NATO leaders at their meeting in London in December.

## **WORLD: Anti-abortion laws: a war against poor women**

***Given the amount of research that shows how ineffective punitive laws are in curbing the number of abortions women carry out, it is difficult to imagine any other reason that they exist, other than to keep women out of the workforce and in poverty.***

By Manuella Libardi

Open Democracy (28.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2RY08Rx> - The political fight against anti-abortion legislation is in fact a class battle, and the reality is that abortion is only illegal for poor women. Women with resources can always interrupt their unwanted pregnancies. Either they know a doctor who performs medical abortions for an exorbitant price, they have the resources to travel to a place where abortion is legal, or they have the means to buy an abortion pill in their own country or elsewhere.

Restricting access to safe abortions keeps poor women in poverty, perpetuates the cycle that prevents them from social mobility and allows wealth to remain in the hands of the rich, particularly white men.

Deciding if and when to have a child is essential for a woman's economic and psychological well-being: it has implications for her education and for entering the workforce. In a 2018 study based on interviews with 813 women in the United States throughout five years, researchers found that women who had abortions denied to them were more likely to be in poverty within six months compared to women who were able to interrupt the pregnancy. Women who were denied abortion were also less likely to have full-time work and more likely to depend on some form of public assistance. Both effects "remained significant for 4 years."

The study concludes that "women who were denied an abortion were more likely than women who received an abortion to experience economic difficulties and insecurity for years. Laws restricting access to abortion may lead to worse economic outcomes for women".

### ***Latin America***

In Latin America, this scenario is exacerbated by the huge inequalities of the region, which makes poor women and minorities invisible to those who are creating public policies. Indigenous women, for example, are disproportionately affected by adverse sexual and reproductive health outcomes.

The rates of unwanted pregnancy and teenage pregnancy are high among indigenous populations and indigenous women also face greater risks of complications related to abortion such as injury or death than the general public.

Poor, young and ethnic minority women suffer the physical and social costs imposed on them by the restrictive anti-abortion laws of Latin America the most. Latin America is home to six countries that criminalize abortion in all cases, even in situations where a woman's life is at risk. In El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua and Suriname, women have to carry a full term pregnancy even if it means they could die in the process, which is an explicit violation of their human rights.

This makes Latin America the region of the world with the strictest anti-abortion legislation. The only other two places that fully penalize termination, even if the procedure is medically necessary to save the woman's life, is Malta and the Vatican.

El Salvador made headlines in 2019 when Evelyn Hernández was acquitted of a murder conviction related to the death of a fetus. She had been sentenced to 40 years in prison for giving birth to a dead baby, in other words, for miscarrying.

In this Central American country, at least 159 women have received sentences of between 12 and 40 years of prison for violating the country's anti-abortion laws. About 20 remain in jail today, and none of these women comes from rich or economically stable families. All are poor.

### ***The race factor***

The political-economic order is made up of many variables, and race is among the first. In the United States, black women have the highest abortion rates in the country. This is a consequence of the serious wealth gap between white and black families, which remains constant even among poor families.

A white family that lives near the poverty line generally has a yearly wage of around \$18,000, meanwhile, black families in similar economic situations usually have a near-zero average wealth. While all women suffer the consequences of the battle against abortion, class reality means that women of color feel the effects disproportionately.

A large number of studies show that access to safe abortion in the United States had more visible positive effects among black women. After the legalization of the procedure, the entry of black women into the workforce increased 6.9 percentage points, compared with 2 percentage points among all women.

The legalization of abortion in the United States reduced adolescent fertility among all women. However, black women and girls experienced an increase in the high school graduation rate and college admission, while legalization did not improve educational outcomes for white women and girls. This is another indication of how inequality disproportionately affects women of color.

### ***Restrictive laws do not decrease abortions***

The highest abortion rates are found in developing countries, specifically in Latin America. Leading the list is the Caribbean, with 59 per 1,000 women of reproductive age, followed by South America, with 48. As expected, the lowest rates are found in North America, with 17, and in Western and Northern Europe, with 16 and 18, respectively.

Given the amount of research that shows how ineffective punitive laws are in curbing the number of abortions women carry out, it is difficult to imagine any other reason that they exist, other than to keep women out of the workforce and in poverty.

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## **WORLD: The UN unveils 6 themes in a big year pushing for women's rights**

By Stéphanie Fillion

PassBlue (20.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2TJAani> - As the countdown to this year's main events celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women has begun, UN Women has announced six themes to anchor the two Generation Equality forums to be held in May and in July. While many women's groups applaud the broad themes, some have serious qualms about one topic in particular.

The Generation Equality Forum is a civil society-led global gathering, officially announced last June, that will play a major role in the Beijing+25 commemorations. They officially start with the annual Commission on the Status of Women, or CSW, in March at the United Nations, where a review of the progress and gaps of the 1995 Beijing agenda will be made to inform the two forums later in the year as well as a UN General Assembly session in September.

The new “action coalition” themes are: gender-based violence, economic justice and rights, bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive rights, feminist action for climate justice, technology innovation for gender equality and investing in feminist movements and leadership.

UN Women leads the Generation Equality forums with France and Mexico, where women-centered groups, “allied countries” and other partners will convene from May 7-8 in Mexico City and July 7-10 in Paris. Their goal is to further define the blueprint hammered out at the New York conference on how to achieve gender equality — especially for young women — by 2030.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted by 189 countries at a conference held in 1995 to achieve gender equality and women’s rights. Hillary Clinton, the United States first lady at the time, famously declared at the Beijing meeting, “human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights. . . .”

Despite progress on some fronts, no country has achieved gender equality since that bold declaration. In the current political environment, growing nationalism and populism in certain countries, such as the US, pushback against ensuring full rights for women has been powered by the highest levels of governments.

“The themes for the action coalitions were finalized through a thorough analytical process of reviewing evidence and data to assess the nature of need, the degree of readiness and the action coalition’s ability to deliver game-changing results within five years,” said Julien Pellaux, the strategic planning adviser to the executive director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka.

Each coalition will be led by a group of partners, including UN member states, women’s movements, civil society organizations and corporations as well as some UN agencies. The themes were chosen by a 52-member Generation Equality Strategic Planning and Leadership Group, formed by UN Women.

In addition, the coalitions will work on a plan toward the UN Decade of Action, which aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals.

This year is also an important marker for commemorating UN Security Council Resolution 1325, on women, peace and security, a 20-year-old landmark document ensuring women’s rights in conflict. It has made scant progress in guaranteeing that women are equally represented at peace negotiations, to the disappointment of many women’s groups.

While some themes chosen by UN Women echo traditional ones on gender issues, the one on technology innovation reflects more recent realities.

Technology holds significant potential to improve women’s and girls’ lives, Pellaux from UN Women told PassBlue. “The diverse ways in which technology is impacting on gender equality shows that rather than being an unstoppable force, technology is malleable and can be geared towards the achievement of social goals with the right interventions and levers.



“Interventions and investments should support technological development and innovation and ensure that technology serves the purpose of advancing gender equality,” he said.

### ***'Bodily autonomy'***

The reaction to the announcement of the themes has not been roundly praised. Some women's groups around the world are dismayed about the process behind the choice of themes and the results, saying the decision-making has been dominated by Western organizations favoring decriminalization of prostitution.

In November, PassBlue published a story about UN Women having just declared its neutrality in the battle among global feminists over whether sex work should be decriminalized. At the time, a statement from Mlambo-Ngcuka, the head of UN Women, overruled a 2013 memo that the agency would “recognize the right of all sex workers to choose their work or leave it and to have access to other employment opportunities.”

The move to neutrality by UN Women, possibly to avoid fearsome squabbles on the topic during 2020 commemorations, seemed to surprise advocates of decriminalization.

“We are aware of the different positions and concerns on the issue of prostitution/sex work and are attentive to the important views of all concerned,” Mlambo-Ngcuka wrote in the statement. “UN Women has taken a neutral position on this issue. Thus, UN Women does not take a position for or against the decriminalization/legalization of prostitution/sex work.”

Mlambo-Ngcuka was responding to a letter she had received days earlier, signed by more than 1,400 individuals and organizations, who were concerned that UN Women was allowing civil society groups advocating for decriminalization of buyers and sellers of sex to influence future debates about women's equality and rights. Those debates included the Generation Equality forums and the Commission on the Status of Women meeting. Last week's announcement on the action themes, however, is keeping the debate around UN Women's neutrality alive.

Taina Bien-Aimé, the executive director of the New York-based Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, which opposes the legalization of prostitution/sex work, denounced the wording of the theme on “bodily integrity.” She says it favors one side of the debate.

The letter sent to UN Women last fall was written by Bien-Aimé's organization. She is a former Wall Street lawyer and a founder of Equality Now.

“The concern is that,” Bien-Aimé told PassBlue, “while respect for SRHR [sexual and reproductive health and rights] is key to all women's fundamental rights to health and equality, it has, incomprehensibly, become a vehicle to push to legalize the global multi-billion-dollar sex trade and redefine prostitution as labor.”

Pellaux of UN Women said the wording of the themes “was kept general for now with the expectation that Coalition leaders will have [to] further refine the titles as part of the Action Coalition blueprints.”

“This includes the coalition on ‘bodily integrity and sexual and reproductive health and rights,’ ” he said.