

Table of Contents

- ***AFGHANISTAN: Taliban unmoved by UN call to lift bans on Afghan women & girls***
- ***AFGHANISTAN's Taliban rulers order NGOs to prevent women from working at their jobs as protests spread***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: Taliban ban Afghan women from university education***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: Afghan women leaders conference held in Istanbul***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: Taliban turn away girls from secondary schools***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: UN experts decry Taliban measures to "steadily erase" Afghan women & girls from public life***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: Girls' despair as Taliban confirm secondary school ban***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: Taliban blocking female aid workers***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: Taliban beheaded female volleyball player***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: Misogynistic policies & Men-only meetings: How have women coped under the Taliban?***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: An Afghan woman in Kabul: 'Now I have to burn everything I achieved'***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: In conservative Kandahar, new gym creates safe space for Afghan women***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: Afghanistan to appoint female deputy governors, starting with President's home province***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: Ventilator from old car parts? Afghan girls pursue prototype***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: Women negotiators seeking to preserve rights in Afghan peace talks***
- ***AFGHANISTAN: A crucial moment for women's rights in Afghanistan***
- ***ASIA: Pandemic fallout hampers women's sport in Asia***
- ***ASIA: International Women's Day: Meet 11 of Asia's trailblazers***
- ***BELARUS: Belarus's female revolution: how women rallied against Lukashenko***
- ***BELGIUM: Etterbeek replaces colonial street names with women's names***
- ***BELGIUM: Famous Belgian lawyer does not hire women because of #MeToo***
- ***CHINA: China's birth rate push trumps gender equality, with women hit with 'parenthood penalty'***
- ***CHINA: Gender equality in China, from birth ratio to politics and unpaid care work, still has a long way to go: report***
- ***EGYPT: Egyptians outraged over some schools forcing girls to wear the hijab***

- ***EU/FRANCE: New French Renew boss at odds with Macron on gender-violence***
- ***EU gender equality reaches new milestone: is progress accelerating?***
- ***EU: More equal sharing of care would reduce workplace gender inequality***
- ***EU: Sex workers struggle to survive Covid-19 pandemic***
- ***EU: Coronavirus puts women in the frontline***
- ***EU: Women's rights: MEPs call for action to fight backlash against gender equality***
- ***EU: New study published: Gender-based asylum claims and non-refoulement: Articles 60 and 61 of the Istanbul Convention***
- ***GREECE: Greek parliament elects country's first female president***
- ***INDIA: 'It's not a grave we must fit in': the Kashmir women fighting for marital rights***
- ***INDIA: India's COVID-19 gender blind spot***
- ***INDIA: Indian women protest new citizenship laws, joining a global 'fourth wave' feminist movement***
- ***INDIA: Landmark ruling grants women equal rights in Indian army***
- ***IRAN bans women from stadiums, again***
- ***IRAN: Iran implements law allowing women to pass their nationality to their children***
- ***IRAN: U.S. "maximum pressure" on Iran hurts the women it claims to help***
- ***IRAN: Iran's sole female Olympic medalist says she's defected***
- ***IRELAND: Ireland must prioritise female healthcare, urges women's council***
- ***ISRAEL: Israeli schoolgirls in 'shorts rebellion' against sexist dress code***
- ***ITALY: Italy's 'boys' club' politics shuts women out of coronavirus debate***
- ***JORDAN: Custody laws maintain a sexist status quo***
- ***KENYA: Kenya High Court suspends move to dissolve parliament over lack of women***
- ***KENYA: For love or land – the debate about Kenyan women's rights to matrimonial property***
- ***LIBYA: Libya's forgotten half: between conflict and pandemic, women pay the higher price***
- ***MEXICO: Mexican diplomacy has gone feminist***
- ***MOROCCO: Morocco's CNDH campaigns for women with disabilities' rights***
- ***NEW ZEALAND: New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern appoints country's first Indigenous female foreign minister***

- ***NIGERIA: Undressing for redress - the significance of Nigerian women's naked protests***
- ***PALESTINE: How one woman with a disability builds a life in Gaza***
- ***PALESTINE: New report from UN Women brings forth voices of Palestinian women under COVID-19 lockdown***
- ***PALESTINE: Palestinian men take up cooking in quarantine***
- ***RUSSIA: Ensuring Russia's sex workers' rights essential for wider gender equality***
- ***SAUDI ARABIA: The case of Salma al-Shehab sentenced to 34 years in prison to be raised at the UN***
- ***SAUDI ARABIA: Saudi women activists launch campaign against home detention and male guardianship***
- ***SAUDI ARABIA: Saudi military opens first women's section***
- ***SAUDI ARABIA: Repressive site for Dakar Rally***
- ***SCOTLAND: Scotland becomes first country to provide period products for free***
- ***SOUTH KOREA: Lee Hyo-jae, champion of women's rights in South Korea, dies at 95***
- ***SPAIN: Spain will now fine companies that don't reveal gender pay gap data***
- ***TANZANIA: Witchcraft accusations and cataracts: The effects of open-fire cooking in Tanzania***
- ***TURKEY: Turkish women rage against sexism with topsy-turvy tweets***
- ***UK: Britain, Equality and the EU: a 'Progress' Report***
- ***UK: Special report: As men's sport clamours to restart, how women's sport is being abandoned***
- ***USA: 'The other half of my soul': Widows of Covid-19 bond over sudden loss***
- ***USA: 'I won't be the last': Kamala Harris, first woman elected US vice-president, accepts place in history***
- ***USA: Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Supreme Court justice and legal pioneer for gender equality, dies at 87***
- ***USA: A century after women gained the right to vote, majority of Americans see work to do on gender equality***
- ***USA: Coronavirus recession will hit women harder, experts warn***
- ***USA: U.S. soccer says women don't deserve equal pay because they have less skill***
- ***WORLD: Analysis of feminists' prejudice against religious minority women***
- ***WORLD: 'War on Women' needs forceful response, not glib statements***
- ***WORLD: U.N. : Gender Parity in UN's Treaty Bodies: Challenges and Solutions***

- **WORLD: The rocky road to gender equality: Are women better off now than in 1970?**
- **WORLD: Press release: 20 Years on, radical change needed to realize women's inclusion in peace and political power**
- **WORLD: Nobel prize: two women share chemistry prize for the first time for work on 'genetic scissors'**
- **WORLD: Caster Semenya loses appeal for equal treatment**
- **WORLD: Hitting women hard, pandemic makes gender poverty gap wider: U.N.**
- **WORLD: When will sports stop policing femininity?**
- **WORLD: UN Committee stands with women and girls in global anti-racism protests**
- **WORLD: Support civil society at the UN Security Council**
- **WORLD: COVID-19 increases suffering of children in conflict**
- **WORLD: Including widows in the work to "build back better" from COVID-19**
- **WORLD: Gender lens essential to addressing linked climate change and security crises, urges joint UN report**
- **WORLD: COVID-19 sparks urgency around justice for women, new report calls for action**
- **WORLD: 5 actions to help bring the most marginalized girls back to school after COVID-19**
- **WORLD: It is time for the world to start caring for the caregivers**
- **WORLD: What do countries with the best coronavirus responses have in common? Women leaders**
- **WORLD: States should not use religious beliefs to justify women and LGBT+ rights violations – UN expert**
- **WORLD: UN chief: Growing inequality for women should shame world**
- **WORLD: NATO adopts first-ever policy on preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse**
- **WORLD: The UN unveils 6 themes in a big year pushing for women's rights**
- **ZIMBABWE: Zimbabwe makes it illegal for schools to expel pregnant girls**

AFGHANISTAN: Taliban unmoved by UN call to lift bans on Afghan women & girls

By [Ayaz Gul](#)

[VOA](#) (22.06.2023) — Afghanistan's Taliban rejected a fresh call Thursday from the United Nations to remove what it says are "punishing restrictions" on the impoverished country's female population.

The rebuke comes a day after a meeting of the U.N. Security Council was told the restrictions block Afghan women and girls from accessing education and work and participating in public life at large.

Since regaining control of Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban has banned girls from universities and teenage girls from attending schools beyond the sixth grade. They have also ordered most public sector female employees to stay at home. Women have also been barred from visiting parks and gyms.

Responding to the criticism from the U.N., the Taliban-led foreign ministry in Kabul called the remarks an interference in the country's internal affairs.

"The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan remains committed to international norms and obligations that do not contradict the principles of Islamic law, contravene Afghanistan's cultural norms or undermine our national interests," the statement said, using the official name of the Taliban government.

"We, therefore, urge all actors to respect the peremptory norm of non-interference and cease all attempts at meddling in our internal affairs, including the modalities and composition of our governance and laws."

The Taliban is not recognized by any foreign government or international organization and their curbs on women and girls are seen as a major obstacle in its efforts to be regarded as Afghanistan's legitimate government.

While briefing the U.N. Security Council on Wednesday, Roza Otunbayeva, head of the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, slammed Taliban edicts banning her organization and other agencies from employing local women.

She urged the Taliban to "rescind" the ban to enable the United Nations to continue its full support to millions of Afghan families in need of urgent assistance.

Otunbayeva also rejected Taliban suggestions to replace female national staff with male Afghans. Since the ban went into effect on April 5, the U.N. has instructed its female staff to work from home and for non-essential male staffers to also work remotely.

"We have been given no explanations by the de facto authorities for this ban and no assurances that it will be lifted. We will not put our national female staff in danger and therefore we are asking them not to report to the office," she said.

The U.N. envoy said she had told the Taliban that as long as restrictions on Afghan women "are in place, it is nearly impossible that their government will be recognized by members of the international community."

In a meeting earlier this month, Taliban Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada directed government spokespersons to emphasize the enforcement of Islamic law in their statements.

"The United Nations and the United States have held the entire world hostage and nothing moves without their dictation," he told the meeting in the southern city of Kandahar, which is known as the birthplace of the Taliban.

"The Islamic Emirate [the Taliban] effectively controls all parts of Afghanistan, but non-Muslim and even Islamic countries refuse to recognize it," the reclusive Taliban leader, who rarely leaves Kandahar, was quoted as saying.

The Taliban welcomed parts of Otunbayeva's speech on Wednesday, where she acknowledged that the group's ban on opium cultivation in Afghanistan had been "effectively enforced," and decreased the cultivation "significantly."

New satellite images examined by geospatial analytics firm [Alcis](#) and longtime Afghanistan expert David Mansfield revealed this month that the scale of the reduction in opium production across the country is unprecedented, with cultivation in southern provinces down by at least 80% compared with last year when the Taliban banned the growing of poppies for opium.

The U.N. envoy also praised the Taliban's efforts to improve the Afghan economy, reduce corruption and generate "sufficient" revenues to finance government operations, including paying civil-service salaries.

AFGHANISTAN's Taliban rulers order NGOs to prevent women from working at their jobs as protests spread

Radio Free Europe (24.12.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3HYo17n> - In the latest assault on women's rights, Afghanistan's Taliban rulers ordered all domestic and international NGOs to prevent female employees from working at their jobs, claiming that many were not observing dress codes in the conservative Muslim nation.

"There have been serious complaints regarding the nonobservance of the Islamic hijab and other rules and regulations pertaining to the work of females in national and international organizations," the Islamist group's economy ministry said on December 24 in a note sent to NGOs and seen by AFP and other Western news agencies.

AP reported that the note said that any organization which did not comply with the order would have its license to operate in the country revoked.

In a statement, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said it was "profoundly concerned" about the reported order by "Taliban de facto authorities" and said it would seek to meet with the Afghan rulers to gain clarity.

"Any such order would violate the most fundamental rights of women, as well as be a clear breach of humanitarian principles," it said. "This latest decision will only further hurt those most vulnerable, especially women and girls."

Full details of the order were not immediately available, and it was not clear how it would affect the various United Nations agencies operating in Afghanistan.

U.S. Secretary of State [Antony Blinken said on Twitter](#) that he was "deeply concerned" by the Taliban move and that "this decision could be devastating for the Afghan people."

The reports come as rare protests continued to erupt in parts of Afghanistan following the Taliban decision announced on December 20 to forbid women from universities, drawing condemnation from the international community and the UN.

Taliban security forces have used violence and arrested several people as they have [dispersed protests](#) by Afghan women against the ruling.

On December 24, dozens of women and girls [protested in the western city of Herat](#) before they were stopped by security forces, according to video posted on social media.

AP said it observed video showing women yelling and running for cover to avoid water cannons before returning to the main street to continue their protest.

VOA quoted a local Taliban official as saying that security forces blocked protesters from reaching buildings housing the provincial government.

On December 22, a group of some 50 women dressed in hijabs, some wearing masks, gathered in the capital, Kabul, for a protest march against the move before they were attacked and dispersed by Taliban security forces, participants and witnesses told RFE/RL.

Several hundred medical students -- both male and female -- [protested](#) against the measure at Nangarhar University's medical school in eastern Afghanistan on December 21.

Some of the female students, who did not want to be named for fear of reprisals by the Taliban, told RFE/RL's Radio Azadi that their end-of-semester exams were supposed to begin on December 22, but following the announcement, they were barred from taking the exams.

In a rare display of solidarity, some male students joined the protest and refused to take part in the exams as well.

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has [urged the Taliban rulers to revoke the decision](#) to ban female students from universities.

UNAMA warned that preventing women from "contributing meaningfully to society and the economy will have a devastating impact on the whole country," and bring more international isolation and economic hardship to a country already on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres earlier said he was "deeply alarmed" by the Taliban decision, labeling it another "broken promise" by the group -- which vowed to protect women's rights when it took power.

Since the Taliban seized power in August of last year, Western officials and activists, along with some inside Afghanistan, have expressed concerns about women's rights under the extreme conservative rule of the Islamist Taliban leadership. The Taliban rulers have not been officially recognized as the country's government by the international community.

Women's rights were severely restricted during the Taliban's first stint in power until they were driven from government by a U.S.-led invasion in 2001.

AFGHANISTAN: Taliban ban Afghan women from university education

Higher education ministry issues indefinite order three months after thousands sat entrance exams

By Hikmat Noori

The Guardian (20.12.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3jwm0F2> - Afghanistan's Taliban rulers have ordered an indefinite ban on university education for the country's women, the ministry of higher education said in a letter issued to all government and private universities.

"You all are informed to implement the mentioned order of suspending education of females until further notice," said the letter signed by the minister for higher education, Neda Mohammad Nadeem.

The ministry's spokesperson, Ziaullah Hashimi, who tweeted the letter, confirmed the order in a text message to Agence France-Presse.

"My female students are distraught and I don't know how to console them," said Meena, 52, a lecturer in Afghanistan who used a pseudonym for fear of retaliation. "One of them moved to Kabul from a remote province, overcoming so many hardships, because she got into a prestigious university here. All her hopes and dreams were crushed today."

Meena, who was at university when the [Taliban](#) last seized power in the late 1990s, said she could well understand her student's fears. "I lost many years of my education last time they were in power. And the day the Taliban took over Kabul, I knew that they would ban the girls from university."

"They may seem like a changed group with their smartphones, social media accounts and nice cars, but they are the same Taliban that denied me the education and are now killing the future of my students," she said.

Prof Manizha Ramizy, an exiled child rights activist, said she had received panicked messages from her female students. "They are scared and terrified, looking at a hopeless future," she said.

Afghan women have been subjected to months of increasingly tighter restrictions, she said, but many had still hoped that education would remain accessible.

"They would complain to me about how they were mistreated in the classrooms and in society. It was a hellish experience, but at least they had the silver lining that would graduate soon and realise their potential. It is all gone now," she said.

The ban on higher education comes less than three months after thousands of girls and women sat university entrance exams across the country, with many aspiring to choose engineering and medicine as future careers.

After the takeover of Afghanistan by the hardline Islamists in August last year, universities were forced to implement new rules including gender-segregated classrooms and entrances, and women were only permitted to be taught by female professors or old men.

Most Afghan teenage girls have already been [banned from secondary school education](#), severely limiting university intake.

Journalism student Madina said she was struggling to comprehend the weight of Tuesday's order.

"I have nothing to say. Not only me but all my friends have no words to express our feelings," the 18-year-old said. "Everyone is thinking about the unknown future ahead of them. They buried our dreams."

The move provoked an international chorus of condemnation, with the US warning the Taliban would be held to account.

"This unacceptable stance will have significant consequences for the Taliban and will further alienate the Taliban from the international community," said state department spokesperson Ned Price.

The UN was "deeply concerned" by the order, said Ramiz Alakbarov, the secretary general's deputy special representative for Afghanistan.

"Education is a fundamental human right. A door closed to women's education is a door closed to the future of Afghanistan," he tweeted.

Responding to the ban, the International Rescue Committee said: "The closure of universities to women and girls is a chilling step backwards for Afghanistan. There are no two ways about it: women must be allowed to work and to move freely, and girls must be allowed to continue to go to school."

The Taliban adhere to an austere version of Islam, with the movement's supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, and his inner circle of Afghan clerics opposed to modern education, particularly for girls and women.

But they are at odds with many officials in Kabul and some of their rank and file, who had hoped girls would be allowed to continue learning after the takeover.

Women have been pushed out of many government jobs or are being paid a slashed salary to stay at home. They are also barred from travelling without a male relative, and must cover up outside the home, ideally with a burqa.

In November they were prohibited from going to parks, funfairs, gyms and public baths. In a cruel U-turn, the Taliban in March [blocked girls from returning to secondary schools](#) on the morning they were supposed to reopen.

Several Taliban officials say the secondary education ban is only temporary, but have given a litany of excuses for the closure, from a lack of funds to time needed to remodel the syllabus along Islamic lines.

AFGHANISTAN: Afghan women leaders conference held in Istanbul

However, the Islamic Emirate said that the rights of women and girls are respected within the framework of Islamic laws in the country

By Waheeda Hasan

Tolo News (27.08.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3B8QG5H> - They voiced concerns about women's lack of access to work and education and asked the international community to assist Afghan and international organizations working for women's rights.

"There should be a detailed investigation mechanism to follow up on the actions of the Taliban. Second, the issue of girls' education should be invested in for different alternatives for girls' education and. Third, investments should be made in girls' employment," said Rahila Sidiqi, a women's rights activist.

"If the demands listed here are presented to the world community, international organizations and institutions, and the concerned countries, and this message is also delivered to the Taliban, then women will continue their battles and protests if they are not accepted," said Soraya Paikan, a women's rights activist.

Meanwhile, Rina Amiri, the US Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights called on Muslim majority countries to be the loudest voices on women's rights and human rights in Afghanistan.

In an interview with Okaz/Saudi Gazette, Amiri said it is important for Saudi Arabia to be a leading voice in countering the Islamic Emirate narrative, as the Kingdom is the country that the Muslim world overall looks to.

"I am Muslim. I know from my own experience and from history that Islam is the first religion that gave women their rights. I look to Muslim countries to engage with the Taliban, to challenge that narrative, to engage Afghans, and to say no."

She said: "Islam is a religion very much aligned with human rights and with women's rights."

"The security council should be looking to add more Taliban leaders to the list of people subject to travel bans and to other measures based on their involvement in human rights violations. Second of all, when the human rights council convenes again in September, it should be looking to put in place a new mechanism to greatly enhance the UN's ability to report on and to provide accountability for human rights violations that are happening in Afghanistan right now," said the associate director of the women's rights division at Human Rights Watch, Heather Barr.'

"Women's rights in Afghanistan should be protected in a similar way to that of women in other Islamic nations. Schools are open and women are employed in other Islamic nations. We have to get to this point," said Tariq Farhadi, political analyst.

However, the Islamic Emirate said that the rights of women and girls are respected within the framework of Islamic laws in the country.

"The rights of all women and girls in Afghanistan have been preserved since the Islamic Emirate's arrival, and the Islamic Emirate is working to address any issues and find solutions to all the problems," said Bilal Karimi, deputy spokesman of the Islamic Emirate.

Earlier, a number of countries and international organizations called for the observance of human rights, particularly the right to work and the education of women and girls.

AFGHANISTAN: Taliban turn away girls from secondary schools

The New Arab (23.03.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3uxITKp> - [The Taliban](#) ordered girls' secondary schools in Afghanistan to shut Wednesday [just hours after they reopened](#), an official confirmed, sparking confusion and heartbreak over the policy reversal by the hardline Islamist group.

"Yes, it's true," Taliban spokesman Inamullah Samangani told *AFP* when asked to confirm reports that [girls had been ordered home](#).

He would not immediately explain the reasoning, while education ministry spokesman Aziz Ahmad Rayan said: "We are not allowed to comment on this".

An *AFP* team was filming at [Zarghona High School](#) in the capital, Kabul, when a teacher entered and said class was over.

Crestfallen students, back at school for the first time since [the Taliban](#) seized power in August last year, tearfully packed up their belongings and filed out.

"I see my students crying and reluctant to leave classes," said Palwasha, a teacher at Omra Khan girls' school in Kabul.

"It is very painful to see your students crying."

United Nations envoy Deborah Lyons called reports of the closure "disturbing".

"If true, what could possibly be the reason?" she tweeted.

"The UN in Afghanistan deplores today's reported announcement by the Taliban that they are further extending their indefinite ban on female students above the 6th grade being permitted to return school," the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan said in a statement.

When the Taliban took over last August, schools were closed because of the Covid-19 pandemic, but only boys and younger girls were allowed to resume classes two months later.

There were fears the Taliban would shut down all formal education for girls, as they did during their first stint in power from 1996 to 2001.

The international community has made the right to education for all a sticking point in negotiations over aid and recognition of the new Taliban regime, with several nations and organisations offering to pay teachers.

On Wednesday, the order for girls' secondary schools to resume appeared to only be patchily observed, with reports emerging from some parts of the country -- including the Taliban's spiritual heartland of Kandahar -- that classes would restart next month instead.

But several did reopen in the capital and elsewhere, including Herat and Panjshir -- temporarily at least.

"All the students that we are seeing today are very happy, and they are here with open eyes," Latifa Hamdard, principal of Gawharshad Begum High School in Herat, told *AFP*.

Barriers

The education ministry said reopening the schools was always a government objective and the Taliban were not bowing to international pressure.

"We are doing it as part of our responsibility to provide education and other facilities to our students," ministry spokesman Rayan told *AFP* Tuesday.

The Taliban had insisted they wanted to ensure schools for girls aged 12 to 19 were segregated and would operate according to Islamic principles.

The Taliban have imposed a slew of restrictions on women, effectively banning them from many government jobs, policing what they wear and preventing them from travelling outside of their cities alone.

They have also detained several women's rights activists.

Even if schools do reopen fully, barriers to girls returning to education remain, with many families suspicious of the Taliban and reluctant to allow their daughters outside.

Others see little point in girls learning at all.

"Those girls who have finished their education have ended up sitting at home and their future is uncertain," said Heela Haya, 20, from Kandahar, who has decided to quit school. "What will be our future?"

It is common for Afghan pupils to miss chunks of the school year as a result of poverty or conflict, and some continue lessons well into their late teens or early twenties.

Human Rights Watch also raised the issue of the few avenues girls are given to apply their education.

"Why would you and your family make huge sacrifices for you to study if you can never have the career you dreamed of?" said Sahar Fetrat, an assistant researcher with the group.

The education ministry acknowledged authorities faced a shortage of teachers -- with many among the tens of thousands of people who fled the country as the Taliban swept to power.

"We need thousands of teachers and to solve this problem we are trying to hire new teachers on a temporary basis," the spokesman said.

AFGHANISTAN: UN experts decry Taliban measures to "steadily erase" Afghan women & girls from public life

UN (17.01.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3KnpRxh> - Taliban leaders in Afghanistan are institutionalizing large scale and systematic gender-based discrimination and violence against women and girls, a group of UN human rights experts* said today.

The experts reiterated their alarm expressed since August 2021 at a series of restrictive measures that have been introduced since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, particularly those concerning women and girls. "Taken together, these policies constitute a collective punishment of women and girls, grounded on gender-based bias and harmful practices," the experts said.

"We are concerned about the continuous and systematic efforts to exclude women from the social, economic, and political spheres across the country." These concerns are exacerbated in the cases of women from ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities such as the Hazara, Tajik, Hindu and other communities whose differences or visibility make them even more vulnerable in Afghanistan, they added.

The experts also noted the increased risk of exploitation of women and girls including of trafficking for the purposes of child and forced marriage as well as sexual exploitation and forced labor.

These exclusionary and discriminatory policies are being enforced through a wave of measures such as barring women from returning to their jobs, requiring a male relative to accompany them in public spaces, prohibiting women from using public transport on their own, as well as imposing a strict dress code on women and girls.

"In addition to severely limiting their freedom of movement, expression and association, and their participation in public and political affairs, these policies have also affected the ability of women to work and to make a living, pushing them further into poverty," the experts said. "Women heads of households are especially hard hit, with their suffering compounded by the devastating consequences of the humanitarian crisis in the country." Of particular and grave concern is the continued denial of the fundamental right of women and girls to secondary and tertiary education, on the premise that women and men have to be segregated and that female students abide by a specific dress code. As such, the vast majority of girls' secondary schools remain closed and the majority of girls who should be attending grades 7-12 are being denied access to school, based solely on their gender.

"Today, we are witnessing the attempt to steadily erase women and girls from public life in Afghanistan including in institutions and mechanisms that had been previously set up to assist and protect those women and girls who are most at risk," the experts said in reference to the closure of the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the physical occupation of the premises of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission.

"Various vital, and sometimes lifesaving, service providers supporting survivors of gender-based violence have shut down for fear of retribution, as have many women's shelters, with potentially fatal consequences for the many victims in need of such services." Other efforts aimed at dismantling systems designed to prevent and respond to gender-based violence have included discontinuing specialized courts and prosecution units responsible for enforcing the 2009 Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and preventing many women aid and social workers from being able to fully perform their jobs and assist other women and girls.

While these measures have affected women and girls of all spheres of life, the experts highlighted their particular concerns for women human rights defenders, women civil society activists and leaders, women judges and prosecutors, women in the security forces, women that were former government employees, and women journalists, all of whom have been considerably exposed to harassment, threats of violence and sometimes violence, and for whom civic space had been severely eroded. Many have been forced to leave the country as a result.

"We are also deeply troubled by the harsh manner with which the de facto authorities have responded to Afghan women and girls claiming their fundamental rights, with reports of peaceful protesters having been often beaten, ill-treated, threatened, and in confirmed instances detained arbitrarily," the experts said.

"We are also extremely disturbed by the reports of extrajudicial killings and forced displacement of ethnic and religious minorities, such as the Hazara, which would suggest deliberate efforts to target, ban, and even eliminate them from the country."

The experts reiterated their call to the international community to step up urgently needed humanitarian assistance for the Afghan people, and the realization of their right to recovery and development. The financial and humanitarian crisis has been particularly

devastating for groups in situations of heightened vulnerability within the Afghan population, particularly women, children, minorities and female-headed households. At the same time, the international community must continue to hold the de facto authorities accountable for continuous violations of the rights of half of the Afghan society and to ensure that restrictions on women and girl's fundamental rights are immediately removed.

"Any humanitarian response, recovery or development efforts in the country are condemned to failure if female staff, women-led organizations, and women in general - particularly those from minority communities - continue to be excluded from full participation in the needs assessments as well as in the decision-making, design, implementation and monitoring of these interventions," the experts said.

ENDS

***The experts:** [Ms. Reem Alsalem, Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences](#); [Mr. Ahmed Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief](#); [Ms. Siobhán Mullally, Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children](#); [Mr. Pedro Arrojo Agudo, Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation](#); [Mr. Morris Tidball-Binz, Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions](#); [Mr. Gerard Quinn, Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#); [Mr. Michael Fakhri, Special Rapporteur on the right to food](#); [Mr. Olivier De Schutter, Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights](#); [Ms. Sorcha MacLeod \(Chair-Rapporteur\), Ms. Jelena Aparac, Mr. Ravindran Daniel, Mr. Chris Kwaja, Working Group on the use of mercenaries](#); [Mr. Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association](#); [Mr. Saad Alfarargi, Special Rapporteur on the right to development](#); [Fernand de Varennes, Special Rapporteur on minority issues](#); [Mr. Tomoya Obokata, Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences](#); [Ms. Irene Khan, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression](#); [Mr. Livingstone Sewanyana, Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order](#); [Ms. Cecilia Jimenez-Damary, Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons](#); [Ms. Mama Fatima Singhateh, Special Rapporteur on the Sale of children](#); [Ms. Mary Lawlor, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders](#); [Melissa Upreti \(Chair\), Dorothy Estrada Tanck \(Vice-Chair\), Elizabeth Broderick, Ivana Radačić, and Meskerem Geset Techane, Working Group on discrimination against women and girls](#); [Ms. Elina Steinerte \(Chair-Rapporteur\), Ms. Miriam Estrada-Castillo \(Vice-Chair\), Ms. Leigh Toomey, Mr. Mumba Malila, Ms. Priya Gopalan, Working Group on arbitrary detention](#); [Ms. Gladys Acosta Vargas, Chair of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women](#); [Ms. Alexandra Xanthaki, Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights](#); [Ms. Tlaleng Mofokeng, Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health](#); [Ms. Koumba Boly Barry, Special Rapporteur on the right to education](#); [Ms. E. Tendayi Achiume, Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance](#).

The Special Rapporteurs and Working Groups are part of what is known as the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council's independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures' experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for

their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.

The [Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women](#) monitors States parties' compliance with the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#), which to date has [189](#) States parties.

UN Human Rights, Country Page — [Afghanistan](#)

AFGHANISTAN: Girls' despair as Taliban confirm secondary school ban

By Hugo Williams and Ali Hamedani

BBC World Service (08.12.2021) - <https://bbc.in/3eqmtCW> - Teenage schoolgirls in Afghanistan have told the BBC of their growing desperation as they continue to be excluded from school more than three months after the Taliban takeover.

"Not being able to study feels like a death penalty," says 15-year-old Meena. She says that she and her friends feel lost and confused since the closure of their school in north-eastern Badakhshan province.

"We have nothing to do apart from housework... we are just frozen in one place," says Laila, 16, whose school in Takhar province shut the day the Taliban seized power in August.

BBC interviews with students and headteachers in 13 provinces show girls' frustration at still being barred from secondary school, despite assurances from the Taliban that they would be able to resume their studies "as soon as possible".

Teachers, nearly all of whom had not been paid since June, said the situation was affecting girls' wellbeing, with one blaming the closures for the underage marriage of three of her students.

One headteacher from Kabul, who stays in touch with her students via Whatsapp, said: "The students are really upset, they're suffering mentally. I try to give them hope but it's hard because they are exposed to so much sadness and disappointment."

Teachers also reported a worrying drop in attendance among girls in primary schools, who have been allowed to return. They said that increased poverty and security concerns meant families were reluctant to send younger girls to school.

Officials have previously avoided confirming that this was an outright ban. But in an interview with the BBC, acting Deputy Education Minister Abdul Hakim Hemat confirmed that girls would not be allowed to attend secondary school until a new education policy was approved in the new year.

Despite this, some girls' schools are reported to have re-opened after negotiating with local Taliban officials.

In the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif in Balkh province, one head teacher told us that there were no problems and girls were attending school as normal.

But another student in the same city told the BBC that a group of armed Taliban fighters had been approaching schoolgirls on the streets, telling them to make sure their hair and mouths were not visible. As a result around a third of her class had stopped coming to school.

"We have our life in our hands when we leave home. People don't smile. The situation is not calm. We are shivering with fear," she said. The Taliban government ordered boys to return to secondary school in September, but made no mention of girls.

Headteachers in three different provinces told the BBC that they had reopened schools, only to be told to close by local officials without explanation a day later. Girls had been turning up at the school gates every day asking when they would be allowed to return, one said.

Laila, who wants to be a midwife or doctor, says she keeps her school equipment clean and tidy in her room, not allowing anyone to touch it, waiting for the moment when it can be put to use again.

"When I see my clothes, books, scarf and my shoes, all new just sitting in my cupboard without being used, I get very upset. I never wanted to sit at home," she says.

Meena wants to be a surgeon, but doubts whether she'll be allowed to continue her studies.

She remembers lining up in the playground at school and laughing with her friends, where they would sing the national anthem before going to lessons.

"Whenever I think about those moments, I feel upset and hopeless about our future," she says.

Mr Hemat said the current situation was a temporary delay while the government ensured a "safe environment" for girls to go to school.

He emphasised the need for girls' and boys' classes to be segregated, something which is already common throughout Afghanistan.

Girls and women were banned from schools and universities during the last Taliban rule between 1996 and 2001.

This year's closures have already had a permanent effect on the lives of some girls, according to testimony from one head teacher in south-eastern Ghazni province.

"At least three of our girls aged 15 and under have been married off underage since the Taliban took over," said the teacher, who feared others would follow as their families grow frustrated seeing them at home "doing nothing".

Unicef has said that it is deeply concerned about reports that child marriage is on the rise in Afghanistan.

One headteacher in central Ghor province told the BBC that the issue of school closures was irrelevant given the other problems facing her students.

"I think many of our students are going to die... They don't have enough food to eat and they cannot keep themselves warm. You cannot imagine the poverty," she said.

**All names of interviewees have been changed to protect their identities*

AFGHANISTAN: Taliban blocking female aid workers

Discriminatory Rules Hinder Lifesaving Assistance

Human Rights Watch (04.11.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3r3oM6p> – Taliban rules prohibiting most women from operating as aid workers are worsening the humanitarian crisis in [Afghanistan](#). Countrywide restrictions mean that aid will reach fewer families in need, particularly women-headed households.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has mapped the agreements between aid agencies and the Taliban in each of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, showing where female staff members will be permitted to function. The document, reviewed by Human Rights Watch, indicates that, as of October 28, 2021, Taliban officials in only three provinces had provided a written agreement unconditionally permitting women aid workers to do their jobs. In over half the country, women aid workers face severe restrictions, such as requirements for a male family member to escort them while they do their jobs, making it difficult or impossible for them to do their job effectively.

"The Taliban's severe restrictions on women aid workers are preventing desperately needed lifesaving aid from reaching Afghans, especially women, girls, and women-headed households," said [Heather Barr](#), associate women's rights director at Human Rights Watch. "Permitting women aid workers to do their jobs unfettered is not a matter of agencies or donors placing conditions on humanitarian assistance, but an operational necessity for delivering that assistance."

Afghanistan's current crisis, like most humanitarian crises, can be expected to cause the most harm to [women](#) and girls. The last 20 years of war in Afghanistan resulted in over [100,000](#) deaths among fighters, many of whom left behind [widows](#) and children. Widows struggled to survive even before the current economic crisis and Taliban-imposed restrictions on women's access to paid work. In addition, women with disabilities, whether married or single, are often seen as a burden on their families and are at increased risk of violence both inside and outside the home.

Female aid workers in Afghanistan play an important role in reaching and assessing the needs of women and girls and female-headed households, especially because the society is often deeply segregated by gender. The lack of women aid workers also means that women with disabilities have less access to rehabilitative services.

In Badghis province, the Taliban are not allowing women aid workers to work at all. In two other provinces – Bamiyan and Daikundi – the Taliban have said women aid workers are only permitted to work during assessments – gathering information about people's needs – but not in other stages, such as delivering aid.

In 16 more provinces, the Taliban have said that women aid workers must be accompanied by a *mahram* (a male family member chaperone) when they are outside the office. The most crucial work women aid workers do is often outside the office, meeting with people in need including women and girls, assessing their needs, determining risk factors they face, and ensuring that assistance reaches those who need it most. Requiring women aid workers in these roles to be escorted, forces a male family

member to essentially become a second unpaid worker or – very often – will prove to be an impossible requirement that forces the woman to leave her job.

The Taliban have also restricted the types of work female aid workers can do. In 11 provinces, women aid workers are permitted to work only in health and education programs, blocking them from other areas of humanitarian assistance, such as distributing food and other necessities, water and sanitation, and livelihoods assistance, in which women's participation is also essential. Another key aspect of aid programming is protecting and assisting people, predominantly women and girls, who may face gender-based violence. Without women workers this task is virtually impossible. The Taliban, since taking over Afghanistan on August 15, have systematically [dismantled](#) systems established in the country to prevent and respond to gender-based violence.

Taliban officials in only five provinces have provided written agreements explaining their rules for women aid workers as of October 28; the rest of the agreements allowing women aid workers are oral. In the absence of written guidance, individual Taliban members are more likely to harass women workers, impose restrictions beyond those agreed to, and block women from working.

Many women aid workers have been afraid to go to work since the return of the Taliban, fearing harassment on the street and at their workplace and retaliation by Taliban members and sympathizers who oppose women working. Without a written agreement, women workers will feel less secure and able to continue their work.

Aid agencies told Human Rights Watch that the Taliban are increasingly imposing requirements for offices, strictly segregating employees by gender, with no contact between female and male employees. Such restrictions harm both those in need of assistance and women employees, and reduce the effectiveness of agencies women aid workers kept from the room where decisions are being made, won't be able to provide their expertise, with expected harm to potential female recipients. And women workers who are cut out of key discussions and decision-making in their agencies will find that their careers, job retention, and morale suffer.

Afghanistan faces a devastating and rapidly worsening humanitarian crisis. The country's economy faces collapse, set off by widespread lost income, cash shortages, rising food costs, separation from global financial systems, and an abrupt halt to the development assistance that made up at least [75](#) percent of the previous government's budget. A growing number of [media reports](#) have said that [families](#) are being forced to [sell](#) their children – almost always girls – ostensibly for marriage, even at very young ages, to have food to survive or to repay debts.

Officials with the UN and several foreign governments have warned that economic collapse will exacerbate acute malnutrition and could lead to outright famine. Surveys by the World Food Programme (WFP) reveal that over 9 in 10 Afghan families have insufficient food for daily consumption, with half saying that they ran out of food at least once in the previous [two](#) weeks. One in three Afghans is already [acutely](#) hungry.

In December 2020, OCHA estimated that [half of all those over age 65](#) already needed humanitarian assistance. At the time, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) warned that an estimated 3.1 million children – half of Afghanistan's children – were acutely [malnourished](#). In September, UNICEF's executive director [warned](#) that at least one million children "will suffer from severe acute malnutrition this year and could die without treatment." By mid-2022, 97 percent of Afghans may be [below](#) the poverty line, the UN Development Program said.

"Taliban leaders have been demanding that donors address the unfolding crisis by unlocking aid funding for Afghanistan, but the Taliban's misogynistic policies are blocking aid from those needing it most," Barr said. "The Taliban should immediately permit all aid workers, women and men, to fully do their jobs, or they will be placing even more people at risk."

AFGHANISTAN: Taliban beheaded female volleyball player

An Afghan volleyball player on the girls' national team was beheaded by the Taliban — with gruesome photos of her severed head posted on social media, according to her coach. See all the pictures [here](#)

By Lee Brown

New York Post (21.10.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3GFc4jF> - Mahjabin Hakimi, one of the best players in the Kabul Municipality Volleyball Club, was slaughtered in the capital city of Kabul as troops searched for female sports players, her coach [told the Persian Independent](#).

She was killed earlier this month, but her death remained mostly hidden because her family had been threatened not to talk, claimed the coach, using a pseudonym, Suraya Afzali, due to safety fears.

Images of Hakimi's severed neck were published on Afghan social media, according to the paper, which did not say how old she was.

Conflicting reports online suggested that happened earlier, with an apparent death certificate suggesting she was killed Aug. 13 — the final days of the Taliban's insurgency [before seizing Kabul](#).

However, the Payk Investigative Journalism Center said its sources also [confirmed that Hakimi "was 'beheaded' by the Taliban in Kabul](#)." The governing group has yet to comment, Payk Media said.

Afzali told the Persian Independent that she was speaking out to highlight the [risk that female sports players face](#), with only two of the women's national volleyball team having managed to flee the country.

"All the players of the volleyball team and the rest of the women athletes are in a bad situation and in despair and fear," she told the paper. "Everyone has been forced to flee and live in unknown places."

One of the players who escaped, Zahra Fayazi, [told the BBC](#) last month that at least one of the players had been killed.

"We don't want this to repeat for our other players," she told the broadcaster from her new home in the UK.

"Many of our players who are from provinces were threatened many times by their relatives who are Taliban and Taliban followers.

"The Taliban asked our players' families to not allow their girls to do sport, otherwise they will be faced with unexpected violence," Fayazi said.

"They even burned their sports equipment to save themselves and their families. They didn't want them to keep anything related to sport. They are scared," she said.

Another teammate who escaped told the BBC everyone was "shocked" when they heard that one of their team had been killed.

"I'm sure it was the Taliban," said Sophia, a pseudonym to protect her family members still in Afghanistan. "Maybe we will lose other friends," she said.

AFGHANISTAN: Misogynistic policies & Men-only meetings: How have women coped under the Taliban?

After the Taliban swept to power in Afghanistan, press conferences were convened in which Talib spokespersons assured the international community that women's rights would be respected, within the confines of Islam. But how have women actually fared?

By Sabena Siddiqui

The New Arab (14.10.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3E67fhr> - Soon after the withdrawal of US troops, Afghanistan was swiftly taken over by Taliban fighters in August this year. During their previous government from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban had stopped girls from going to school while women could not continue with their jobs and were not allowed to leave home without a male chaperone. In case of resistance, people were often flogged and beaten.

Faced with uncertainty, Afghan women now find themselves back from where they started twenty years ago, all the gains and small freedoms they acquired in that time are gone in a single stroke. This time, however, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, promised in his very first presser that they would "honour women's rights within the norms of Islamic law."

Following this statement, girls in primary schools in Kabul were allowed to attend classes while a female news anchor even interviewed a Taliban official. But then erratic incidents started happening such as a female news anchor being sent back home and told she was not permitted to work, or when female students and professors were sent home in Herat.

"The international community should communicate to the Taliban that an entity that denies girls access to secondary education, denies women access to most employment, and includes zero women in senior levels of their government, will never be seen as legitimate in 2021"

Terming the current state of women and human rights situation in Afghanistan as "disappointing", Qatar's Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani stated, "The recent actions that we have seen unfortunately in Afghanistan, it has been very disappointing to see some steps being taken backwards."

At a presser along with top diplomats from the European Union (EU), Al-Thani also said, "We have also been trying to demonstrate for the Taliban how Muslim countries can conduct their laws, how they can deal with women's issues." Ever since the Taliban took over Afghanistan, Doha has been helping with airport handling and evacuation efforts and has tried to exert some influence over the new interim government to make it more liberal.

As many senior Taliban leaders have lived in Doha due to the Afghan peace process since 2015, the Qatar government had expected them to learn from its own encouraging progress in the field of women empowerment even though it is an Islamic country. In Qatar, women outnumber men in most professional sectors and university education nowadays.

But more countries need to pressure the Taliban on women's rights.

As Heather Barr, Associate Director of the Women's Rights Division and former Afghanistan researcher at Human Rights Watch told *The New Arab*, "Unfortunately, it seems like the Taliban are on track to implement most of the misogynistic policies they imposed from 1996 to 2001, and they are facing little push-back from the international community beyond lip service. I am particularly struck by how many governments are going to meet the Taliban without women – and we have no idea whether women's rights are even a topic of discussion in these men-only meetings."

In which ways do Afghan women stand to get affected by the current scenario?

First, women's education has been badly hit. As per USAID, just one year before the Taliban takeover, girls constituted 40 percent of the 9.5 million students in the country. Even though the Taliban have tried to be more moderate compared to their last period of rule, there seems to be very little deviation from their past stance.

"Unfortunately, it seems like the Taliban are on track to implement most of the misogynistic policies they imposed from 1996 to 2001, and they are facing little push-back from the international community beyond lip service. I am particularly struck by how many governments are going to meet the Taliban without women – and we have no idea whether women's rights are even a topic of discussion in these men-only meetings."

Instead, they are regressing to their old ways as girls face restrictions in pursuing their education once again. Recently, some girls returned to high school in a northern province of Afghanistan even though they remain restricted in the rest of the country. In a video shared by the spokesman Suhail Shaheen, they were shown waving Taliban flags and wearing white headscarves over black outfits and black veils.

According to Mohammad Abid, an education ministry official in Kabul, the government policy on girls education remains the same and that, "High schools still remain closed for girls." Basically, girls in primary school were allowed to attend classes from the very beginning, but the older girls remained restricted.

Expressing deep concerns, the United Nations agency for children, UNICEF has stated that, "It is critical that all girls, including older girls, are able to resume their education without any further delays. For that, we need female teachers to resume teaching."

Women are also being banned from playing sports.

Second, there is an economic setback too as women's open access to work is being curtailed. According to Afghanistan's 2004 constitution, women were not only made part of the political process, they joined the army and police, became judges and journalists. Many ladies had started working in the media and government departments too.

However, most of the women's reforms could not spread to the rural areas, making Kabul and other bigger cities more liberal. Due to restrictions on their movement outside without a male chaperone, it even becomes difficult to get medical care on time, consequently, the country also has a steep maternal mortality rate.

"There is a resistance for women to speak out, for women to hold a certain structure in our country"

Finally, there may be legal implications. Throughout the 1990s, Afghan women fought for their rights. Even the decade preceding the first term of Taliban rule when Afghanistan was under Soviet occupation had been a challenging time. They finally re-entered public life after the US army intervention in 2001, then in 2004 the Afghan constitution upheld women's rights and they could hold a certain quota of seats in the Parliament.

In a bid to reset laws pertaining to women, Taliban rulers have now proceeded to set up a ministry for the "propagation of virtue and the prevention of vice" in the same building where the Women's Affairs Ministry was located. Determining women's rights under hard-line Sharia law (an extreme version of Islamic law), the Taliban will formulate their new policies according to interpretation from various clerics, jurists and politicians.

As Mariam Wardak, a lawyer and former senior Afghan government official, told Vox, "There is a resistance for women to speak out, for women to hold a certain structure in our country."

According to Human Rights Watch, a 2009 law that made 22 offences like rape, forced marriage, denying property rights and preventing from receiving education into criminal offences against women was mostly ignored in the country anyway.

Meanwhile, public hangings of criminals have also resumed and there seems to be little difference between the ruthless Taliban rule in the 90s and the present regime.

However, there are some impediments in the way of the Taliban. Running their government and paying salaries may not be possible unless they bend to the demands of other countries that can put pressure on them to reform.

As Heather Barr has suggested, "The international community could – and should – push back hard and communicate to the Taliban that an entity that denies girls access to secondary education, denies women access to most forms of employment and includes zero women in senior levels of their government, will never be seen as legitimate in 2021."

Just to earn legitimacy, recognition and escape diplomatic isolation and economic collapse, the "Taliban 2.0" may think twice before going back to the 90s.

AFGHANISTAN: An Afghan woman in Kabul: 'Now I have to burn everything I achieved'

A university student tells of seeing all around her the 'fearful faces of women and ugly faces of men who hate women'

By a Kabul resident

The Guardian (15.08.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2UqqQaV> - Early on Sunday morning I was heading to university for a class when a group of women came running out from the women's dormitory. I asked what had happened and one of them told me the police were evacuating them because the Taliban had arrived in Kabul, and they will beat women who do not have a burqa.

We all wanted to get home, but we couldn't use public transport. The drivers would not let us in their cars because they did not want to take responsibility for transporting a woman. It was even worse for the women from the dormitory, who are from outside Kabul and were scared and confused about where they should go.

Meanwhile, the men standing around were making fun of girls and women, laughing at our terror. "Go and put on your *chadari* [burqa]," one called out. "It is your last days of being out on the streets," said another. "I will marry four of you in one day," said a third. With the government offices closed down, my sister ran for miles across town to get home. "I shut down the PC that helped to serve my people and community for four years with a lot of pain," she said. "I left my desk with tearful eyes and said goodbye to my colleagues. I knew it was the last day of my job."

I have nearly completed two simultaneous degrees from two of the best universities in [Afghanistan](#). I should have graduated in November from the American University of Afghanistan and Kabul University, but this morning everything flashed before my eyes. I worked for so many days and nights to become the person I am today, and this morning when I reached home, the very first thing my sisters and I did was hide our IDs, diplomas and certificates. It was devastating. Why should we hide the things that we should be proud of? In Afghanistan now we are not allowed to be known as the people we are.

As a woman, I feel like I am the victim of this political war that men started. I felt like I can no longer laugh out loud, I can no longer listen to my favourite songs, I can no longer meet my friends in our favourite cafe, I can no longer wear my favourite yellow dress or pink lipstick. And I can no longer go to my job or finish the university degree that I worked for years to achieve.

I loved doing my nails. Today, as I was on my way home, I glanced at the beauty salon where I used to go for manicures. The shop front, which had been decorated with beautiful pictures of girls, had been whitewashed overnight.

All I could see around me were the fearful and scared faces of women and ugly faces of men who hate women, who do not like women to get educated, work and have freedom. Most devastating to me were the ones who looked happy and made fun of women. Instead of standing by our side, they stand with the Taliban and give them even more power.

Afghan women sacrificed a lot for the little freedom they had. As an orphan I weaved carpets just to get an education. I faced a lot of financial challenges, but I had a lot of plans for my future. I did not expect everything to end up like this.

Now it looks like I have to burn everything I achieved in 24 years of my life. Having any ID card or awards from the American University is risky now; even if we keep them, we are not able to use them. There are no jobs for us in Afghanistan.

When the provinces collapsed one after another, I was thinking of my beautiful girlish dreams. My sisters and I could not sleep all night, remembering the stories my mother used to tell us about the Taliban era and the way they treated women.

I did not expect that we would be deprived of all our basic rights again and travel back to 20 years ago. That after 20 years of fighting for our rights and freedom, we should be hunting for burqas and hiding our identity.

During the last months, as the Taliban took control in the provinces, hundreds of people fled their houses and came to Kabul to save their girls and wives. They are living in parks

or the open air. I was part of a group of American University students that tried to help them by collecting donations of cash, food and other necessities and distributing it to them.

I could not stop my tears when I heard the stories of some families. One had lost their son in the war and didn't have any money to pay the taxi fare to Kabul, so they gave their daughter-in-law away in exchange for transportation. How can the value of a woman be equal to the cost of a journey?

Then today, when I heard that the Taliban had reached Kabul, I felt I was going to be a slave. They can play with my life any way they want.

I also worked as a teacher at an English-language education centre. I cannot bear to think that I can no longer stand in front of the class, teaching them to sing their ABCs. Every time I remember that my beautiful little girl students should stop their education and stay at their home, my tears fall.

AFGHANISTAN: In conservative Kandahar, new gym creates safe space for Afghan women

Reuters (24.09.2020) - <https://reut.rs/3kS9afG> - In Afghanistan's southern province of Kandahar, rights activist Maryam Durani has found a fresh outlet for her decades of advocacy - a new fitness centre for women.

Durani, 36, is a fierce campaigner for women's rights in the conservative stronghold where the Islamist Taliban militant group have major sway and take a conservative stance on the position of women, who mostly wear the burqa in public.

She runs a radio station for women, has served on the provincial council and was presented with the International Women of Courage Award by Michelle Obama for in 2012. Last year, Durani switched tack to open a female-only gym, which draws about 50 women attend each day.

"The reaction of the ladies was very positive because they needed it," she said, shortly after working out with a group of clients. "What bothered me was the reaction of the men...who reacted negatively to our club and even insulted me because they thought our club was in opposition to Sharia."

With a troop withdrawal signed between the United States and the Taliban, who have fought a bloody war for 19 years, many women in Afghanistan worry the militant group may exert its influence through formal political channels.

When the Taliban ruled the country between 1996 and 2001, they banned education for females and barred women from leaving the house without a male relative.

The group says it has changed but many women remain sceptical.

"My only concern is about their view of women's rights and what freedoms and restrictions they will impose on me," said Durani.

For now, her focus is on serving the dozens of women who attend the club, whom she describes as a cross-section of society including housewives and women who work outside the home.

"My only wish is to be seen as a human in this society," she said.

AFGHANISTAN: Afghanistan to appoint female deputy governors, starting with President's home province

Radio Free Afghanistan RFE/RL (09.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3ewMGO1> - A new decree from Afghan President Ashraf Ghani states that all of the country's 34 provinces will appoint women as deputy governors.

Syed Shah Saqim, a spokesman for the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), said the appointment will start with the southeastern province of Logar, home province of the Afghan president.

Speaking to Radio Free Afghanistan on July 9, Saqim said the appointment of female deputies in all provinces has begun. "One of the women is set to be appointed as deputy governor today in Logar Province, and this will continue in other provinces, as well," he said.

He added that "after being interviewed by the president, the female deputy governors will be selected and appointed based on merit and competence."

Earlier, presidential spokesman Sediq Sediqqi said the cabinet had decided that women would be appointed deputy governor in every province.

According to information from the president's office, the proposal to elect female deputy governors for all 34 provinces was initiated by the Women's Affairs Ministry and was approved by the cabinet earlier this week.

Vice President Amrullah Saleh also expressed support for including women in high-ranking government positions. In a recent tweet, he stated that "each province, as a MUST, will have a [female] deputy governor. This is part of our structural reform to further empower women."

"This is a quota which has to be implemented in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan," he continued. "It must be done soon. Even if a woman becomes a governor the quota still holds & applies."

Women in Afghanistan have made substantial gains in employment, education, and legal protections since the fall of the hard-line Taliban regime nearly two decades ago. Their regime banned women's employment and education.

However, Afghan women still face numerous challenges because of domestic abuse, discrimination, taboos, and violence.

AFGHANISTAN: Ventilator from old car parts? Afghan girls pursue prototype

By Tameem Akhgar

AP News (19.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2KikEJg> - On most mornings, Somaya Farooqi and four other teen-age girls pile into her dad's car and head to a mechanic's workshop. They use back roads to skirt police checkpoints set up to enforce a lockdown in their city of Herat, one of Afghanistan's hot spots of the coronavirus pandemic.

The members of Afghanistan's prize-winning girls' robotics team say they're on a life-saving mission — to build a ventilator from used car parts and help their war-stricken country battle the virus.

"If we even save one life with our device, we will be proud," said Farooqi, 17.

Their pursuit of a low-cost breathing machine is particularly remarkable in conservative Afghanistan. Only a generation ago, during the rule of the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban in the late 1990s, girls weren't allowed to go to school. Farooqi's mother was pulled from school in third grade.

After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, girls returned to schools, but gaining equal rights remains a struggle. Farooqi is undaunted. "We are the new generation," she said in a phone interview. "We fight and work for people. Girl and boy, it does not matter anymore."

Afghanistan faces the pandemic nearly empty-handed. It has only 400 ventilators for a population of more than 36.6 million. So far, it has reported just over 900 coronavirus cases, including 30 deaths, but the actual number is suspected to be much higher since test kits are in short supply.

Herat province in western Afghanistan is one of the nation's hot spots because of its proximity to Iran, the region's epicenter of the outbreak.

This has spurred Farooqi and her team members, ages 14 to 17, to help come up with a solution.

On a typical morning, Farooqi's father collects the girls from their homes and drives them to the team's office in Herat, zigzagging through side streets to skirt checkpoints. From there, another car takes them to a mechanic's workshop on the outskirts of the city.

In Herat, residents are only permitted to leave their homes for urgent needs. The robotics team has a limited number of special permits for cars.

So far, Farooqi's father hasn't been able to get one, but the girls are in a hurry. "We are concerned about security driving out of the city but there is no other option, we have to try to save people's lives," Farooqi said.

At the workshop, the team is experimenting with two different designs, including an open-source blueprint from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The parts being used include the motor of a Toyota windshield wiper, batteries and sets of bag valve masks, or manual oxygen pumps. A group of mechanics helps them build the frame of a ventilator.

Daniela Rus, a professor at MIT, welcomed the team's initiative to develop the prototype. "It will be excellent to see it tested and locally produced," she said.

Tech entrepreneur Roya Mahboob, who founded the team and raises funds to empower girls, said she hopes Farooqi's group will finish building a prototype by May or June. In all, the team has 15 members who work on various projects.

The ventilator model, once completed, would then be sent to the Health Ministry for testing, initially on animals, said spokesman Wahid Mayar.

Farooqi, who was just 14 years old when she participated in the first World Robot Olympiad in the U.S., in 2017, said she and her team members hope to make a contribution.

"Afghans should be helping Afghanistan in this pandemic," she said. "We should not wait for others."

AFGHANISTAN: Women negotiators seeking to preserve rights in Afghan peace talks

By Abubakar Siddique & Feroza Azizi

RFE/RL (30.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2UMvKfG> - Women named as part of an Afghan delegation tasked with conducting peace talks with the Taliban say they will be attempting to preserve women's rights in complex negotiations with the hard-line Islamist movement aimed at ending four decades of war in Afghanistan.

"We will be aiming to discuss women's citizenship rights, which will cumulatively include all political, social, and economic rights within the framework of a republican [political system]," Habiba Sarabi, a leading member of the Afghan delegation, told Radio Free Afghanistan.

Sarabi, a physician and deputy leader of the government's peace council, says they will be specifically looking to preserve the right to vote, right to candidacy, work, free speech, and all other human and women rights in the peace talks with the Taliban. "We don't expect these issues to be resolved in the coming months because negotiations are a long, drawn-out process," she said.

Factions and politicians supporting the current political system, formally called Afghanistan's Islamic Republic, and the Taliban have already missed the March 10 deadline to begin direct negotiations. The fragile process is threatened by mounting violence and disagreements between the Taliban and the Afghan government, which in turn is facing a political crisis. The global coronavirus pandemic also threatens Afghanistan's future as the country struggles with a lack of healthcare resources and the imminent fallout of global economic decline.

Shahla Fareed, another Afghan peace negotiator, says she hopes her country can avoid a catastrophe by promptly beginning peace negotiations.

"We are likely to face many obstacles in these negotiations, but we hope to convince the Taliban that only Afghans are the victims of war in their country," she told Radio Free Afghanistan. "I demand that both sides conduct these talks in a calm atmosphere."

Fareed, however, acknowledged that they still have no agenda for the talks, which she hopes will be put together by the 21-member delegation. Five of its members are women. She said they would hopefully be able to discuss women's representation, education, work, their participation in security and politics along with guarantees to access healthcare.

So far, the Taliban have vaguely signaled that unlike their hard-line regime in the 1990s, they will be granting women some rights.

"We together will find a way to build an Islamic system in which all Afghans have equal rights, where the rights of women that are granted by Islam -- from the right to

education to the right to work -- are protected," the movement's deputy leader wrote in an op-ed published by the New York Times last month.

On the ground in Afghanistan, however, the Taliban and the Afghan government appeared to be on a trajectory of escalating hostilities. President Ashraf Ghani and his rival former chief executive Abdullah Abdullah have so far failed to agree on power-sharing despite a \$1 billion U.S. aid cut and public frustration with their political conflict.

On March 30, the country's national security council postponed the release of 100 Taliban prisoners. A day earlier, presidential adviser Waheed Omar called on the Taliban "to not make any excuses" after the Taliban refused to deal with the 21-member delegation Kabul announced for holding talks with the insurgents. The Taliban said the team was not inclusive and failed to represent the country's diversity.

The fragile process is also threatened by mounting Taliban attacks on the Afghan forces. The militants killed at least 28 Afghan soldiers in remote provinces in the south and north of the country. The violence escalates amid mounting fears that a coronavirus pandemic might ravage communities across Afghanistan because the war-torn nation's anemic healthcare system might not be able to cope with the pandemic.

Last week, the country's health minister warned as many as 110,000 Afghans will be killed by COVID-19, the disease caused by a coronavirus infection.

AFGHANISTAN: A crucial moment for women's rights in Afghanistan

By Heather Barr

Human Rights Watch (05.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2TEjM7r> - This is a moment of both fear and hope for Afghan women — and an urgent time for the world to support their hard-won rights. The Feb. 29 deal between the US and the Taliban could pave the way for a peace that Afghans desperately seek. But there are huge risks for women's rights in this process.

Women have suffered deeply during Afghanistan's 40 years of war, and they desperately long for peace. They have also fought ferociously for equality in the years since the fall of the Taliban government and have made great progress. Today there are women ministers and governors and judges and police and soldiers, and Afghanistan's parliament has a higher percentage of women than does the US Congress.

But Afghan women's rights activists have faced resistance from the Afghan government — and lack of support from international donors — as they fought for their rightful place at the negotiating table for peace talks. This exclusion, combined with the Taliban's relentless discrimination against women and girls, increases fears that women's rights could easily be a casualty of this process.

The US-Taliban deal is focused on foreign troop withdrawal and preventing Taliban support for international terrorism attacks. It also triggers "intra-Afghan" talks between the Taliban, the Afghan government, and other factions, which are slated to start March 10. But women's rights were not included in the Feb. 29 deal. Zalmay Khalilzad, the lead US envoy to the talks, repeatedly said that women's rights — and other issues relating to human rights, political structures and power sharing — should be resolved through the subsequent intra-Afghan talks. This has been a source of frustration to activists.

The Taliban remain deeply misogynistic. Their 1996 to 2001 regime was notorious for denying women and girls access to education, employment, freedom of movement and health care, and subjecting them to violence including public lashing or execution by stoning. Taliban rhetoric and conduct has moderated somewhat in subsequent years, with some Taliban commanders permitting girls to attend primary schools, typically in response to community pressure. But the Taliban also continue to carry out violent attacks against girls' schools and block women and girls from exercising many of their basic rights, and remain deeply opposed to gender equality.

In February, a Taliban leader wrote, "[W]e together will find a way to build an Islamic system in which all Afghans have equal rights, where the rights of women that are granted by Islam — from the right to education to the right to work — are protected." Skeptics noted the comma separating women from equal rights, and that from 1996 to 2001 the Taliban also argued that women were enjoying all rights "granted by Islam."

The Afghan government has been an unreliable supporter — and sometimes even an enemy — of women's rights. The administrations of both Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani have frequently brushed aside women's rights. Both have mostly rebuffed activists' demands for women to have full participation in the peace process, as provided under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. Foreign donors have been more willing to engage in photo ops and grant agreements than to expend political capital to press for Afghan women to be in the room, at the table, during negotiations.

Lack of clarity about the intra-Afghan talks and the designated negotiators has further heightened fears about the implications for women's rights. Political infighting following the disputed Afghan presidential election has delayed the appointment of the government negotiation team. Pressure to divvy up these roles among power brokers threatens to squeeze women out. The absence of clear information about what country will host the talks and who will facilitate them prevents women's rights activists from lobbying for including women.

A fight over whether a release of prisoners will move ahead is muddying the waters further and calling into question the timeline for the intra-Afghan talks. Meanwhile, violence, reduced ahead of the deal's signing, threatens to escalate again.

Several years back it was common to hear Afghan feminists argue that there should be no negotiations with the Taliban — a group that refused to recognize women's full humanity. Today those calls are all but gone. Even the staunchest women's rights activists have mostly accepted that there is no path to peace in Afghanistan but through negotiations with the Taliban.

But protecting women's rights needs to be one of the key objectives of this process, and for that to happen, women need to be at the negotiating table. Governments increasingly recognize that the role of women in peace processes is not just an afterthought, but critical to sustainable and implementable peace accords. The Afghan government and all its international partners need to back Afghan women, who are in the fight of their lives.

ASIA: Pandemic fallout hampers women's sport in Asia

Optimistic growth forecasts threatened as men's games are given priority.

By John Duerden

Nikkei Asia (10.12.2020) - <https://s.nikkei.com/382tjLx> - This year started promisingly for women's sport in the Asia-Pacific. On March 8, more than 86,000 people crammed

into the Melbourne Cricket Ground to watch Australia defeat India in the final of the Women's T20 World Cup.

India loves cricket, and was starting to take more notice of women's events. "Women's cricket was thriving in early 2020," said Vishal Yadav, founder of Female Cricket, a Mumbai academy dedicated to helping people achieve their dreams in the popular game.

"Overall, there was massive progress as they geared up for the World Cup in Australia," Yadav said. "There was a massive crowd there with lots of Indian fans. Domestic cricket was moving forward, and there was optimism."

If women's cricket was starting to go places in India, the same can be said of women's soccer in Indonesia. Esti Lestari, the chairwoman of Women's Football Network Indonesia, was helping the game to grow in the soccer-mad country.

The founder of Persija Kartini, Indonesia's first professional female team, established in 2016, Lestari also helped to found a new professional league, Liga 1 Putri, in 2019. "We started the league for women last year, and everything was positive," she said. "We were not flush with sponsors, but it was sustainable and all the clubs finished the season."

Thanks to the coronavirus pandemic, however, the 2020 season has not yet started for Indonesian women's soccer and many other sports around the region. The Women's T20 World Cup cricket final was one of the last major international sporting events to take place before COVID-19 brought sport around the world to a halt earlier this year.

By August, some sports were returning. There may have been no tennis fans in New York to watch the U.S. Open women's singles final on Sept. 12, but millions tuned in on TV to watch Japan's Naomi Osaka, the world's top-rated player, beat Victoria Azarenka of Belarus. In golf, Kim Sei-young continued South Korea's domination of the women's game on Oct. 11 by winning the Women's PGA Championship in the United States to collect \$645,000 in prize money.

In other sports, however, especially team games such as soccer, cricket and rugby, women have often had to watch the men restart while their own sports have remained in abeyance. That could threaten the future of some -- including sports that were riding a wave of optimism before the pandemic began. Earlier this year, for example, the global association representing professional soccer players warned that the economic effects of the coronavirus would affect female players more than their male equivalents.

"The lack of written contracts, the short-term duration of employment contracts, the lack of health insurance and medical coverage, and the absence of basic worker protections and workers' rights leaves many female players -- some of whom were already teetering on the margins -- at great risk of losing their livelihoods," said the organization, known as FIFPRO.

In India, women's cricket has taken a huge hit, both on and off the field and at the international and domestic levels. "There is a vast difference in the pay scale between male and female cricketers," said Yadav. "Therefore, the female players are left with fewer or sometimes no resources to fight back against such unforeseen economic adversities."

With a population of nearly 270 million, Indonesia has huge potential in global soccer. But it is not clear whether its nascent professional women's league can continue after the interruption caused by the pandemic -- in part because of the greater priority given to restarting the men's game.

"We are back to where we were before. I don't think there will be a league this year. After the pandemic, women's football became less and less of a priority," said Lestari. "Men's football was given priority in getting games playing again."

Lestari added that financial assistance from the Indonesian government and the Football Federation of Indonesia is "crucial" to keep women's professional clubs alive. "They must assist or next year 260 players will have no team," she said.

There is some light at the end of the tunnel. The cost of running women's sport in team games such as soccer, rugby and cricket is far lower than for men's sport, which makes entry costs for corporate sponsors more attractive.

"The cost of entry to support women's sport is much less at the moment," Steve Martin, global chief executive of the M&C Saatchi Sport & Entertainment agency, part of the U.K.-based M&C Saatchi Group, told SportsPro Media, a London-based sports media organization.

Martin added that if his marketing and sponsorship budget were halved, he would reconsider his options. "I maybe can't put all of that 50% into men's sport, so I'll be looking at the deals I have in place and looking at the opportunity in women's sport because I think it can be very cost-effective."

Women's sport in Asia should also benefit from the impact of major sporting events in the region over the next few years, including the Olympics in Tokyo in 2021 and the Women's World Cup soccer finals in Australia and New Zealand in 2023. If the soccer tournament goes ahead as planned it will be the first to be staged in the southern hemisphere, and the first to feature 32 teams -- up from 24 at the 2019 tournament in France and double the number that competed as recently as 2011.

"We have some great opportunities," said Moya Dodd, a former Australian international soccer player. "Everyone in sport is struggling with the uncertainty of COVID right now, but in Asia we have the two most important world tournaments right here, in the next three years. That gives us a comparative advantage. I hope we can use that to boost fan interest, media reach and commercial value."

Dodd said that planning for the resumption of women's sports should be given the same priority by administrators and governments as the comparable men's games, and called for long-term changes to strengthen women's competitions in the wake of the short-term pain inflicted by the pandemic.

"As old habits are broken, we should look to rebuild sport with the equality that we want to see for future generations," she said.

ASIA: International Women's Day: Meet 11 of Asia's trailblazers

From leading Netflix's India ambitions to funding the next unicorn, these are the names to know.

Nikkei Asian Review (04.03.2020) - <https://s.nikkei.com/2IkKzPs> - Despite progress over the past few decades, women in Asia still face significant, structural barriers to success. Ahead of International Women's Day 2020, Nikkei Asian Review has selected 11 inspiring female leaders in business, politics, activism and the arts -- pathbreaking women who are driving change.

Denise Ho Wan-See, Hong Kong (singer and activist)

In the sea of masked, black-clad protesters rallying on the streets of Hong Kong, there is always a familiar face in the crowd. Cantonese pop diva Denise Ho Wan-see has been at the forefront of Hong Kong's fight for freedom since the former British colony was handed over to China in 1997.

Her participation in the "Umbrella Movement" in 2014 -- a 79-day mass sit-in to call for universal suffrage -- came at a huge personal cost. She has since been banned in the lucrative mainland China market, dropped from sponsorship deals and even by her record label.

Six years on, the 42-year-old Ho is now a prominent ambassador for Hong Kong's leaderless democracy movement. As street protests rumbled across the city last year, she went on a global tour to speak on behalf of her comrades at home, giving speeches at a host of conferences overseas, including the Oslo Freedom Forum, the United Nations Human Rights Council and the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China.

"The main message I want to deliver is that Hong Kong protesters are actually in a global fight for universal values," Ho told the Nikkei Asian Review. "This is a fight against suppression and censorship, which are also spreading to more and more old democracies. Therefore we should all stand with Hong Kong."

Ho is outspoken not only on the political front: In 2012 she became the first mainstream singer in Hong Kong to come out publicly as a lesbian. Her advocacy of LGBT rights in the sexually conservative society has made her a frequent target of hate speech.

"There have been many personal attacks based on my gender and sexual orientation," she recalled, "and people would undermine my words because of that. ... But it will only make me speak louder. It's horrendous. How ridiculous when people believe that [sexual orientation] is something they can attack you [for] in 2020."

It is an encouraging trend that women are taking an increasingly vocal role in social movements, Ho said. But speaking out can come at a price. She spoke of her friend Mai Khoi, a Vietnamese singer whose songs often center on resistance and women's rights, and who resorted to underground performances after becoming an enemy of the government.

"It is devastating to see what my friend is going through," she said. "I imagine this is an equally difficult fight for many out there, especially those from repressive countries where women are not supposed to speak up."

Democratic rights -- including people's right to choose their leaders -- are essential for promoting gender equality, Ho argues, citing rights for sexual minorities as an example.

She said LGBT rights in Hong Kong have not advanced at all since she came out eight years ago, while in Taiwan, where the government is democratically elected, same-sex marriage has been legalized.

"This is exactly why we need to fight for democracy and a system in which everyone's voice is well-represented," Ho said. "It is not just about gender rights, but also human rights and all kinds of rights people think they deserve."

For now, Ho is juggling the arduous work of activism with her artistic career. She is in the process of producing a new album, which has been on hold for the past months due to

the prolonged protests. Meanwhile, her advocacy is about to embark on a new phase, with Yale University and the Women in the World Summit in New York as her next destinations.

"International interest in Hong Kong is still high, even though the protests are not as high-energy nowadays due to the [coronavirus] outbreak," she said. "The sentiment is definitely staying, and I am almost sure that things are going to pick up again once the right timing comes."

While street battles have quietened down, Ho believes it is "not only what's happening on the streets that counts," but more importantly, how people "live that spirit in daily lives."

Music is one of the ways to pass on the spirit, Ho said. As she composes new songs inspired by the pursuit of freedom, she hopes that people around the globe, especially women, can gain the courage to speak up and speak their minds.

"My words to these girl fighters are, please remember we are not alone in these fights," she said. "Although we don't know each other and might not ever see each other, we are fighting the same fight together."

(Reported: Michelle Chan)

Amina Sugimoto, Japan (co-founder and chief operating officer, Fermata)

Throughout her childhood, Amina Sugimoto moved around the world, first following her parents' work in international development and then as a student. She aspired to be a doctor, but during pre-med training she decided that she was just too squeamish to practice medicine. Instead, she studied health care economics, obtaining a Ph.D. at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

Returning to work in Japan again in her late 20s, Sugimoto, just like many other women, said that she felt the pressure to think about marriage, having children and building her career. She joined Mistletoe, a Japanese venture capital fund led by Taizo Son -- brother of SoftBank Group founder Masayoshi Son -- where she was introduced to the U.S. startup Modern Fertility, which offers home hormone tests that give women better insight into their fertility.

"I was not interested in feminism at all," Sugimoto said. "Our work is not really about spearheading feminism. It is more of, like, isn't it interesting to know a little bit more about your body?"

Looking into the emerging "femtech" field, she found that there was little appetite among existing investors. Venture capitalists, including those in Mistletoe, were predominantly male and "simply do not understand" the products that are about female bodies, she said. Even though the sector clearly has potential -- consultancy Frost and Sullivan predicts that the market could be worth \$50 billion by 2025 -- investors are still not backing startups. "They are waiting in line to see who would go first," Sugimoto said.

Sugimoto has set out to change that. Last year, along with co-founder Hiroko Nakamura, she set up Fermata, a community for femtech entrepreneurs and users. By November this year they will have moved into actively supporting startups with a new 2.5 billion yen (\$23.1 million) fund. Taizo Son is an early investor. The fund will look for investments across Asia, and attempt to seed a market that, Sugimoto said, does not yet exist -- in part because the subject of women's health often remains taboo.

"For [women's wellness and sexual wellness], problems are not verbalized because no one is talking about them," Sugimoto said. "Unless they are put into words and put into questions, people do not buy even the best product. What I mean is, there is no market."

(Reporter: Akane Okutsu)

Kao Chia-Yu, Taiwan (lawmaker)

When Kao Chia-yu began her 2009 bid to become a city councilor in Taipei, aged 29, she had no money, no support from within the Democratic Progressive Party of which she was a member, and no profile among voters. Rather than buying ads on buses, TV commercials and banners, like other candidates, she went out into the community, meeting voters at parks, markets and restaurants. She rang doorbell after doorbell, followed garbage trucks on their routes around the city and reached out through social media platforms. It was her third attempt at achieving public office, and, she said, it felt like her last chance.

"At that time, I was at the crossroads of my career," she told Nikkei. "Most of my classmates had become lawyers, prosecutors and judges. ... But I wanted to give myself a last try in my own way, as I really love to talk to people and help people solve problems."

Kao went on to win three consecutive council elections, and this year took a seat in the national legislature. Her star is still rising. With a national profile, she is viewed as one of the likely challengers for the post of Taipei City mayor in 2022, a position that is often a steppingstone to higher office. Her approach to engaging voters, mixing digital platforms with ground-level interactions -- such as livestreaming her breakfast at small cafes -- has been widely imitated.

Even though Taiwan has a relatively strong record of women's participation in politics -- 40% of lawmakers are female, the highest in Asia -- women still face cultural and social barriers to high office. Balancing family life with front-line politics is difficult, and there are choices to be made. Two powerful female politicians, President Tsai Ing-wen and Presidential Office Secretary-General Chen Chu, an activist who spent more than six years in prison, remain single. When seeking reelection, former New Power Party lawmaker Hung Tzu-yung was criticized by Foxconn Technology Group founder Terry Gou of being "busy with getting married and having a child" -- a criticism not faced by male politicians.

Kao has faced down critics from within the DPP over her lack of experience. Attempts to sideline and belittle her have been met with characteristically blunt straight-talk. She is still seen as an outsider, dubbed a "lone bird" -- a description she seems to embrace.

"I don't owe anyone any favors, but I also don't have anyone to count on," Kao told Nikkei. "I only have myself, as always."

(Reporter: Cheng Ting-Fang, Lauly Li)

Srishti Behl Arya, India (director for international original film, Netflix India)

On the cover of her MacBook, Srishti Behl Arya has a sticker that says: "On an adventure." Ever since she was brought on board by streaming giant Netflix to head international original film in India in May 2018, that has been her life.

"I have the best job in the whole world," she says. "I get to enable creators to tell the best stories of their lives on the best service they can."

That means that on any given day Behl Arya, 47, is wading through scripts, pitches, books, concepts, all the while looking to connect directors and storytellers. "India is a land of storytellers and we have the problem of plenty," she said.

India has 451 million active monthly internet users, the highest in the world after China, thanks to an explosion of cheap data and affordable smartphones. And Netflix, which launched in India in January 2016, is just one of 30 streaming platforms trying to draw some of those eyeballs. Video streaming service Amazon Prime, The Walt Disney Co.-owned Hotstar and homegrown platforms like Zee5 and ALTBalaji are some of the others in the race for viewers. Disney's streaming service Disney+ will be joining the fray on March 29.

In the past year alone, Behl Arya's unit -- which she co-leads with Aashish Singh -- has announced 17 films. For some of them, Behl Arya has turned to her Bollywood pedigree. The daughter, and granddaughter, of filmmakers -- she also ran a production house with her brother before joining Netflix -- Bollywood is home. For others, she's brought on new writers and directors.

Her mantra is to have "content for every mood," says Behl Arya. That requires "not just diversity of content, but diversity of minds, because that's how you get the real differentiation," she says. For that she has recruited two debutante female directors, three female producers, as well as many women writers who have created female protagonists. This is rare in an industry which has for decades been entirely controlled by men, and has rarely, if ever, told stories from a female perspective.

Behl Arya agrees that because she works at Netflix, she can "lean much more into risk." Bringing on board diverse voices, she said, "is a privilege. I use that word a lot, but I live in a lot of gratitude."

(Reporter: Megha Bahree)

Pocket Sun, China/U.S. (co-founder and managing partner, SoGal Ventures)

Pocket Sun's journey into venture capital began when she lost her job. Back in 2014, Sun, a Chinese native, fell afoul of the U.S. visa lottery and had to leave her job. She signed up for a master's degree program, thinking it would buy her time while she looked for a chance to get back into the corporate world.

As soon as she set foot in the University of Southern California to study entrepreneurship and innovation, she "felt out of place," she told Nikkei. Most of her classmates were male, as were the entrepreneurs who visited to share their experiences.

"Those male entrepreneurs were extraordinary people, but I just found it hard to connect with their stories," Sun said.

In search of like-minded female entrepreneurs, she founded the SoGal Foundation in late 2014, a "women for women" business community. What started out as a high-tea party in a classroom at USC has now become one of the largest businesswomen's networks in the world, counting more than 100,000 members.

In 2016, along with Elizabeth Galbut, Sun founded an investment fund, SoGal Ventures, to support women-led startups and to overcome the structural bias against women in the VC business. In 2019, female founders attracted less than 3% of all the VC investing in the U.S., according to industry information portal PitchBook.

At first, Sun used her own savings, working as a consultant and doing public speaking to make money, but was able to bootstrap \$14 million from outside investors. Although the size of their fund is small, Sun believes it can make a real difference in shaping the future of technology. For now, fewer than 10% of decision-makers at U.S. VC companies are women, according to a 2019 Axios analysis.

SoGal has backed 24 women-led startups so far, including a company making customized prosthetic breasts for cancer survivors, and another that supplies kits for rape victims to collect evidence at any time, sparing them from spending hours finding a designated clinic that runs the tests.

"Venture capitalists have a say on which technology would be developed, and how society is evolving," Sun said. "If this decision-making process is only led by one voice, it is unfair to the rest of the world."

(Reporter: Coco Liu)

Li Yang, China (co-founder, Prop Roots Education Center)

Li Yang says that she is the mother of some 200 children. In 2009, after visiting Jingpo communities in the southern Chinese province of Yunnan with her husband, a Dutch linguist who was studying the Jingpo language, Li found herself drawn into the life of the indigenous group. A Beijing native, Li was impressed by the Jingpo children's knowledge of the natural world, and the depth of their culture. She also discovered a darker side to life.

Drug addiction has become rife in Dehong -- a border region a stone's throw from Myanmar, home to most of China's 150,000-strong Jingpo population -- and the community is in the midst of an identity crisis. They can no longer make a living with their centurieslong hunting tradition, but equally, they have been left behind in China's rapid march toward modernization. Li, who called the situation "heartbreaking," decided to take the matter into her own hands, and started Prop Roots Education Center, a nongovernmental organization that has supported 200 local children.

Every day, children come to a bamboo house in Yinping village to listen to stories, do their homework, and to prepare for urban life through training and roleplay. About 98% of the children Li taught have managed to stay away from drugs, while that figure is less than 50% in nearby villages. Li attributes the difference to her parenting role. "What rural children really need is not money, but our company," she said.

(Reporter: Coco Liu)

Garima Arora, Thailand (chef and co-owner, Restaurant Gaa)

Garima Arora moves quickly. By the age of 29, she had already left a career in journalism to work under the infamous Gordon Ramsay at Verre, then Noma's Rene Redzepi. By 32, her Thai-Indian fusion restaurant in Bangkok, Gaa, had garnered a Michelin star -- a first for an Indian woman -- and debuted on Asia's 50 Best Restaurants list. That same year, she was also awarded the title of Asia's best female chef. Even so, "ambition doesn't have a gender," she told Nikkei.

A handful of women hold the prestigious tally of three Michelin stars, compared to over a hundred male chefs. "I don't think there's any conspiracy to keep women out of the kitchen ... but the truth is, it's very hard for them to stick around," said Arora. "At some point in their lives, they have to choose between working these crazy hours and having a family, and it's impossible to have both. Women are forced to make unrealistic choices."

In her childhood, Arora's father planted the seeds of an obsession with food, as he traveled for work as an event organizer and returned with exotic flavors for his Mumbai-based, Punjabi family. At Gaa, Arora plays with the boundaries of her native cuisine, her upcoming menu asking customers to eat with their hands as they move through five "feasts," from refined hawker fare to seafood.

The chef also ties her rise to lessons learned with Ramsay -- "humility" -- and Redzepi -- "food as an intellectual exercise" -- combined with an instinct to challenge. "I've carried my curiosity throughout my whole career. In everything that I do, I think about it and constantly question it."

(Reporter: Sarah Hilton)

Nicole Yap, Indonesia (managing director, Digitalaya)

Nicole Yap's parents moved from Indonesia to Canada before she was born. Although she had visited regularly, it wasn't until she took part in MIT's Global Startup Lab in 2013, teaching entrepreneurship at Gadjah Mada University in Indonesia's Yogyakarta Province, that she began to think about the country's business potential. She returned to North America, working as a global health consultant in California, and spent some time in Nairobi at a social enterprise.

Then, during a trip to Indonesia in 2017, she saw that the landscape had changed completely. Ride-hailing startup Gojek had become a unicorn -- a private company valued at more than \$1 billion -- and the technology sector was buzzing.

"I feel that there are a lot more interesting problems to be solved here in Indonesia, and that tech and entrepreneurship and startups can do a lot more to actually solve these challenges," she said.

Along with her co-founder Yansen Kamto, Yap launched startup accelerator Digitalaya in 2018. Nearly 100 startups from 12 countries have participated in its programs to date. Digitalaya is the exclusive partner of both Google for Startups and Google Developers Launchpad in Indonesia, and is also a partner to UBS, Indonesia's ride-hailing giant Gojek, and largest private lender Bank Central Asia.

The accelerator's success has established Yap, 34, as a leading figure in a male-dominated industry. Aware that having a strong network is important for women, only a few of whom have senior positions in the industry, Digitalaya has established Simona Ventures, an accelerator program dedicated to women-led startups.

"We think ... having a community of women that they can actually share with, learn from, connect with is even more important in this industry," Yap said.

(Reporter: Erwida Maulia)

Eni Lestari, Indonesia/Kong Kong (chairperson, International Migrants Alliance)

Eni Lestari had always dreamed of going to university, but when the Asian financial crisis hit her native Indonesia, she had to abandon her studies and search for jobs overseas to bail her family out of debt.

Eni first arrived in Hong Kong to work as a domestic helper in 1999, only to find herself deprived of basic labor rights. "I was paid half of the minimum wage and no holiday was

given," she said. "I didn't know anything about the regulations in Hong Kong, so it took months for me to find out I was actually tricked by my employer and the agency."

A friend introduced Eni to a nongovernmental organization offering legal aid and shelter to migrant workers. Living there, she volunteered to answer the counseling hotline; in doing so, she noticed that many helpers were facing similar ordeals in the city.

In 2000, she established the Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers, and is now the chairperson of the International Migrants Alliance, a global association with more than 4,000 members. In 2016, she was chosen to address the first United Nations summit on refugees and migrants in New York. And this is only her side job -- she is still working as a helper on weekdays.

"Knowledge can be so empowering," she said. "In the past, some girls just cried to us and returned home doing nothing. Now, there is a community, both online and offline."

Eni said she hopes other helpers will not give up on learning and self-enrichment because of the nature of their jobs. "You'll never know your possibilities if you don't explore."

(Reporter: Michelle Chan)

Akiko Naka, Japan (founder and CEO, Wantedly)

Akiko Naka's career path, jumping from Goldman Sachs analyst to would-be manga artist to Facebook marketer, is not unthinkable for any hungry person in her early 30s. But in her home country of Japan, it has been wildly unorthodox. "For my grandparents, maybe 80% to 90% of them worked for a company. If you changed jobs, or quit, you were considered an outcast," said Naka.

For her peers, that is changing. Naka's job-matching platform, Wantedly, has signed up 34,000 companies, mostly small to midsize, and has a total user base of 4 million. Job posters do not mention salary -- instead, they advertise by vision and values, challenging the once-a-year-hiring, job-for-life model that undergirds Japan's rigid labor system. Wantedly, founded in 2010, first struggled with resistance from human resources departments that have gradually adopted the service; now, it is listed on the Mothers board for startups, where it has also seen ups and downs.

Fueled by a recent rise in domestic angel investors and venture capital, Naka's is among a small upswell of startups seeking to change the business models of century-old enterprises. "Historically, Japanese people -- we're not willing to make change until it starts to overflow," said Naka. "At some point it snaps, and you have to make change all at once."

(Reporter: Sarah Hilton)

Rossana Hu, China (founding partner, Neri & Hu)

Rossana Hu was born in the southern Taiwanese port city of Kaohsiung and moved to the U.S. at the age of 12. After studying architecture and music at the University of California, Berkeley, and receiving a Master's degree in architecture and urban planning from Princeton University, she worked for major architecture companies in the U.S. before founding her own practice, Neri & Hu, with partner Lyndon Neri, in Shanghai in 2004.

"[A] client requested to have Lyndon's physical presence there for a short stay; the short stay led to a long stay, and we realized how much we would be able to contribute and be a part of an exciting era for Chinese architecture, so we made the move," she told Nikkei.

Neri & Hu has established itself as one of Asia's leading architecture and design practices, merging traditional Chinese design with modern touches. Hu and her partner are the masterminds behind the flagship store of South Korean skin-care brand Sulwhasoo in Seoul, Alila Bangsar, a five-star hotel in Kuala Lumpur, and the New Shanghai Theatre.

"Architecture has never been an easy profession for women," Hu said. Earlier in her career, she was often the only young woman working on projects. However, Neri & Hu has more senior female architects than men. "We have been blessed to not foster a biased working environment for the young staff in our office," she said.

(Reporter: Cheng Ting-Fang, Lauly Li)

BELARUS: Belarus's female revolution: how women rallied against Lukashenko

Protests aimed at toppling autocratic leader have been led by women and show no sign of slowing.

By Shaun Walker

The Guardian (12.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3bXFJWD> - One evening last week, a stylised image of the Belarusian opposition leader, Maria Kolesnikova, was projected on to the wall of a Minsk apartment block.

Mocked up to look like the famous Soviet war poster The Motherland Calls, the image created by Anna Redko shows Kolesnikova heroically holding out a torn passport – a reference to her actions on the border with Ukraine on Tuesday when Alexander Lukashenko's security services tried to deport her.

"She decided on a powerful gesture. That's why she is one of the opposition's leaders and I'm the press secretary," Ivan Kravtsov, one of two others with Kolesnikova who did get deported, told journalists in Kyiv the next day.

Kolesnikova is now in a KGB prison in Minsk, and her determination not to be forced into exile was the latest impressive act of defiance in a revolutionary moment that has, from the beginning, been led and defined by women. On Saturday afternoon, women holding flowers and posters gathered in Minsk to protest – some were detained by masked men in green uniforms. The Saturday demonstrations have become a regular occurrence before the main Sunday protest in the city centre, where for the past four weekends, more than 100,000 people have assembled.

It was a female candidate who rallied support against Lukashenko before last month's elections. The autocratic leader had jailed or exiled the men who wanted to stand against him, but thinking a woman could not pose a real challenge, he allowed the wife of one of his opponents, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, on to the ballot. Along with Kolesnikova and Veronika Tsepkalo, the wife of another candidate who fled Belarus after receiving threats, the three women travelled the country and won support for their simple message of facilitating political change.

Lukashenko's misogynist rhetoric also served as a mobilising force. "The cynicism with which the current president expressed himself about them and their role, it insulted a lot of women," said Kolesnikova in an interview at her campaign headquarters in central Minsk last month.

It was also women who provided the momentum for the protest movement's rejuvenation after the horrific violence inflicted on demonstrators in the aftermath of Lukashenko declaring an implausible victory.

After three evenings of brutality from riot police, 250 women, dressed in white and holding flowers, stood defiantly on a roadside in central Minsk. Police left them untouched and the next day there were multiple rows of flower-waving women throughout the city.

In recent weeks, as most of its leaders have been forced out of Belarus, Kolesnikova has become the visible face of the movement, appearing fearless and cheerful despite the odds stacked against the protesters, regularly appearing at rallies until her kidnap-style arrest earlier this week.

Last month she said her role had been simply to show people that it was possible to demand political change. She said: "The west, Russia won't help – we can only help ourselves. In this way it turned out that female faces became a signal for women, and men too, that every person should take responsibility."

BELGIUM: Etterbeek replaces colonial street names with women's names

By Maïthé Chini

The Brussels Times (15.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3eeFQNL> - From Monday, the Brussels' commune of Etterbeek has replaced the names of eleven streets, that were named after Belgians with a colonial history, with women's names.

The new name signs are temporary and will only stay in place for half a year. With this measure, the college of aldermen wants to decolonise the street names, and show that it is also possible to tell the other side of history.

"We want to see more women represented. And we want to tackle the overrepresentation of the colonial names," said alderman for Public Space Karim Sheikh Hassan. "Of its own accord, the urban landscape does not change so fast, but we wanted to do something temporary," he added.

Many street names, named after Belgians with a military history in the former Belgian colony, have made way for women's names. "We chose a mix of Etterbeek women and international women," said Sheik Hassan.

"We need to allow the people of Etterbeek to own their public space. It also goes with knowing why the place where you live has a certain name, and what is behind it," he added.

A few of the women represented are Rosa Parks, who fought against racial segregation in the United States, the Algerian Lalla Fatma N'Soumer, who fought against French domination, or the Polish Irena Sendlerowa, who saved Jews from Nazi-Germany.

From Etterbeek, the feminist Elise Soyer and the artist Marthe Wery were chosen. The first female doctor of law in Brussels was also given a nameplate, Marie Popelin.

"The number of streets bearing women's names is ridiculously low. We have chosen to pay tribute to women who illustrate the diversity of backgrounds and origins that make up the richness of the Brussels population," said Françoise de Halleux, alderman for Equal Opportunities and Diversity in a Facebook post.

Initially, the aim was to launch the street names around International Women's Day (8 March), but that plan was delayed because of the coronavirus.

The nameplates are part of a broader decolonisation programme organised by the College of Aldermen, which will also include various educational walks for residents and schools will follow in the autumn.

BELGIUM: Famous Belgian lawyer does not hire women because of #MeToo

By Maïthé Chini

The Brussels Times (09.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2TQY9Rk> - A Belgian high profile lawyer, Sven Mary, recently stated in an interview with a Belgian newspaper that his law firm no longer hires women because of the #MeToo movement.

When a woman applies for a job at Sven Mary's law firm, she will be rejected out of fear for #MeToo, he said in an interview with Het Laatste Nieuws on Friday.

According to an analysis by the Harvard Business Review, men are less inclined to hire attractive women since #MeToo, a movement against sexual harassment and sexual assault, took off. Mary said that this was true, and that his firm no longer hires women in general since there had been "an incident with an intern," he said.

"It's a shame, because a lot of competent and intelligent ladies graduate. But I once had a problem with an intern who claimed that she owed her poor evaluation to the fact that she hadn't accepted my advances," Mary said, adding that the complaint was "based on nothing" but that "today, as a man, you are vulnerable" and that he did not want to expose himself to such risks.

"I understand that such accusations cut in. But basically, saying that no woman is going to be hired? I'm afraid he won't get away with that," labour market expert Jan Denys told De Morgen. "Women who are working in good faith are being punished here. I'm assuming, in time, Mary will come to understand that," he added.

In addition, rejecting applications from a specific group of people is prohibited by law. "It does not differ a lot from employers who say they have a problem with Moroccans, for example," Denys said, adding that in reality, an employer takes on whoever they want. "Those who effectively do not want to recruit women can still hide behind the fact that the woman in question is not competent enough," he added. "However, by Mary's saying it, he is not making it easy on himself," Denys stressed.

On social media, Mary's remark has garnered a lot of attention, and many people on Twitter have called for an investigation by Unia, the Belgian centre for equal opportunities.

Assita Kanko, a Belgian MEP and human rights activist tweeted "Lawyer for serious criminals. Afraid of victims of sexual violence," pointing to several of Mary's clients, which include Salah Abdeslam, who is a suspect of the terror attacks in Paris, and Fouad Belkacem, who was an extremist member of the radical Islamic organisation Sharia4Belgium.

CHINA: China's birth rate push trumps gender equality, with women hit with 'parenthood penalty'

China's birth rate is declining so Beijing is encouraging couples to have more children, but employers are worried about extra maternity costs. China still exceeds the global average participation rate for women in the workplace at 60 per cent in 2019, but the rate has been falling since 1990.

By Sidney Leng

South China Morning Post (09.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2LnTS6k> - China's ongoing battle to boost its population is having a knock-on effect on its efforts to ensure gender equality in the workplace, with female applicants increasingly being told they are unsuitable for roles for "unsubstantiated" reasons, including because the role required overtime work, business trips, driving or even moving books.

"These excuses are so unsubstantiated. Overtime and business trips have nothing to do with gender. It's up to your abilities and tolerance. It can not persuade us at all," said Helen Tang, who has been battling gender equality while claiming to be the victim of discriminatory practices since 2018.

China has been struggling with a declining birth rate in recent years and so is encouraging couples to have more children. But with employers worried about maternity costs, discrimination, at least recently, has been rising, particularly since Beijing officially ended its one-child policy in 2016.

While China exceeds the global average participation rate for women in the workplace of 47 per cent with 60 per cent in 2019, the rate has fallen by more than 12 percentage points since 1990, according to the United Nations-backed International Labour Organization.

The gap between male and female labour participation rates in China expanded from 11.6 percentage points to 14.8 percentage points between 1990 and 2019, while it has been shrinking in major economies during the same period.

"I am puzzled. I don't understand why a clerk role is only offered to men," added Tang, who was told male applicants would be prioritised when she called to inquire about the position.

Her treatment saw Tang reach out to Workplace Gender Equality Watch, an informal social media group, and discovered that the problem was more prevalent than she first feared. She later volunteered to work for the organisation.

Founded in 2014, the group is made up of more than 50 part-time volunteers who regularly highlight on social media hiring practises that they believe are discriminatory. The group also files complaints with relevant authorities and companies, and sometimes provides legal help.

"Although China has laws and regulations to protect women's employment rights, gender discrimination in the workplace is still very serious," said Ren Zeping, chief economist at the Evergrande Research Institute.

"Generally speaking, a smaller labour participation gap between men and women means better protection of women's employment rights and higher fertility rates."

China ranked 106th behind Hungary last year on the annual gender gap index compiled by the World Economic Forum, having been 61st in 2008. The index considers employment opportunity, education attainment, health and political empowerment.

In a survey of more than 66,000 people conducted by recruitment portal Zhaopin last year, overall pay for female workers was 17 per cent lower than male workers, and only 5 per cent of women took management roles compared to 9 per cent of men.

Within the Communist Party, less than 30 per cent of members were women in 2018, and less than 27 per cent of party and government leadership roles were taken by women in 2017, according to government data.

Last year, Workplace Gender Equality Watch published notices on more than 100 discriminatory job listings on average per month, up from an average of 69 in 2019.

Based on submissions via social media, many of the roles involved law firms, public institutions, state-owned construction and engineering firms, as well as schools.

The civil service, particularly at the local level, is a hot bed for gender discrimination, according to an analysis of all published jobs from 2017 to 2020 conducted by the group. The share of roles preferring men accounted for more than 10 per cent of all listings each year of the study, with women preferred for just over 1 per cent of roles last year, up from zero in 2019.

Based on official data, the government of Guangdong province, an economic powerhouse in the south of the country, had the most gender discriminatory roles than other provinces, offering 1,449 civil servant roles for men only last year, six times more than for female-only offerings.

Workplace Gender Equality Watch also argued that while some government agencies offered the same number of jobs for men and women, there remains discrimination in hiring practices with less qualified men often hired instead of more qualified women.

In a study conducted before and after China officially abolished its one-child policy in 2016, three researchers led by He Haoran from Beijing Normal University sent fictitious résumés with varied gender information to real job postings in the three most developed cities to test labour market discrimination against expected motherhood.

They found that women, particularly those seen to be within childbearing ages, received fewer responses than before 2016, indicating that women were suffering from a "parenthood penalty" that did not apply to men.

Unlike the planned economy era, when state-owned firms built schools and dormitories to take care of employees' children and provide social services, China today has a large shortage of nurseries and childcare services that has forced some working aged women to leave the workforce.

In the Zhaopin survey, close to 60 per cent of women said they had encountered questions about their marriage and maternity status during the hiring process.

"For companies, maternity costs are a big consideration ... the costs of having children cannot be shared by the society, they can only be shared by firms," added Tang.

"When they take this into consideration, they will reduce job opportunities for women and prefer men more."

By law, China protects equal employment, and in 2019 the government started imposing a fine of up to 50,000 yuan (US\$7,700) for gender discriminatory job postings.

At the end of last year, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security also published a notice banning gender discrimination via online recruitment.

But less than a third of women surveyed by Zhaopin believed that the rules could actually improve the work environment for women.

Lawsuits against gender discrimination during recruitment, though, are rare. One of the first such cases appeared in Zhejiang province in eastern China in 2014, when a new graduate sued a culinary school for repeatedly declining her applications for a clerk role. She was eventually awarded 2,000 yuan (US\$309), which failed to even cover her legal fees.

"We are fully aware that recruitment is only the first step. There is more hidden gender discrimination at work, too," said Tang.

"What we can do is to get rid of discrimination in the hiring process first. And hopefully we can have more government oversight in the future."

CHINA: Gender equality in China, from birth ratio to politics and unpaid care work, still has a long way to go: report

Chinese government report published by the UN Population Fund finds business leadership and politics remain heavily skewed towards men. Gender disparity in education continues to be far higher in rural areas.

By Mandy Zuo

South China Morning Post (23.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/34uFY9W> - From a biased sex ratio at birth to low representation of women in leadership positions, women in China are still at a great disadvantage in many areas, according to a new report by the Chinese government.

While most of the unpaid work is done by women, men still dominate important positions in the political system, top academies and judicial systems, according to the report, "Women and Men in China, Facts and Figures 2019".

Development of women in China had "reached a brand new level", but it was still an "arduous" task because of factors relating to economic growth, historical and cultural reasons, said the report, published on the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) website this week.

It was issued by the National Bureau of Statistics of China and is its sixth report on the theme since 1995. The UNFPA provided technical and financial support.

The ratio of boys to girls at birth, a reflection of sex preference, remained high. There were nearly 112 boys born for every 100 girls in 2017, according to the report.

The natural ratio in this regard is often considered to be around 105 boys for every 100 girls, according to the World Health Organisation.

In 2015, a year after China allowed a second child for some couples, the sex ratio for the second child was over 113 boys for every 100 girls. When it comes to the third child, whose parents need to pay a social support fee as punishment, the ratio was over 148.

In employment, women accounted for just 30 per cent of leadership positions, the report indicated.

The number of women in China's legislature is rising, but there are still far fewer than men. Women made up only one-quarter of the National People's Congress membership, it showed. There is just one woman in the 25-member Politburo of the Communist Party.

Taking care of family was the top reason women lost their jobs, while the time they spent on unpaid care work was more than double that done by men.

Gender disparity continued to be much higher in rural areas, the report suggested.

While China has closed the gender education gap with both sexes achieving universal literacy in urban areas after imposing a nine-year compulsory education, many born in poor villages are still not able to finish school. The average period of education received in rural areas is 7.3 years for girls, comparing to 8.1 years for boys.

For senior rural dwellers, about 57 per cent of women live supported by their family members, compared with 35 per cent for men, the report showed.

Feng Yuan, co-founder of Equality, an NGO for women's rights, said: "Progress is slow and in some ways it's even going backwards, because there has been no practical policy and measures [from the government]."

She urged the central government to take the major responsibility for pushing gender equality forwards.

"It needs more determination from the top leadership," she said.

China ranked 106th among 153 countries in the World Economic Forum's annual ranking on global gender equality last year.

It was the 11th decline in a row, mainly because of slow improvement in its male-dominated political landscape, the report said.

It was 63rd in 2006 when the organisation began compiling the rankings.

EGYPT: Egyptians outraged over some schools forcing girls to wear the hijab

A 13-year-old girl was recently forced to wear the hijab at her school in Egypt, which prompted a wave of condemnation that revealed similar practices across the country.

Al-Monitor (30.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3mLP73K> - Controversy has recently surfaced in Egypt after a 13-year-old girl was forced to wear the hijab at the school she attends in Sharqia governorate. The incident has shed light on similar cases across the country.

Lamia Loutfi, the girl's Muslim mother and program manager at the New Woman Foundation, a human rights institution based in Cairo that provides support to female victims of violence and discrimination, filed complaints Oct. 21 against the school's teachers over their attempts to force girls, including her daughter, to wear the hijab.

She told Al-Monitor about the incident that took place Oct. 20. She was shocked to hear her daughter telling her that school officials had forced the girls to wear the hijab, including Christian students.

Loutfi contacted the school and the director confirmed what her daughter had told her, saying that all the girls are required to wear the hijab at school as part of their uniform and are free to remove it when they leave, and that girls in other schools are required to wear the hijab, too.

When she threatened to file a complaint against the school, the director said she will not allow Loutfi's daughter to enter the school campus unless she wears the hijab. "They told me, 'Take whatever measures you want. We will not allow the girl to enter the school. These are our conditions,'" Loutfi said.

Article 53 of the Egyptian Constitution stipulates, "Citizens are equal before the law, possess equal rights and public duties, and may not be discriminated against on the basis of religion, belief, sex, origin, race, color, language, disability, social class, political or geographical affiliation or for any other reason."

The hijab is an Islamic practice adopted by many women in Muslim countries. However, some Muslim women choose not to wear the veil.

This incident drew condemnation across the country, with parents launching the Arabic hashtag #forcing_girls_to_wear_the_hijab, revealing similar practices in many schools across Egypt. Some families have not opposed such practice out of fear that their children would be kicked out of school.

Hanan Nouredine, a Muslim housewife, told Al-Monitor that her two daughters, aged eight and 10, were forced to veil at the two schools they attend. "We got angry at first, but then we decided to let them wear the veil in order to avoid troubles with the school and bullying from the teachers."

On Oct. 21, the National Council for Women filed a complaint to Minister of Education Tarek Shawki. The complaint included a plea from a mother whose daughter, along with other students, was threatened by her teachers and forced to wear the hijab under the pretext that it is part of the school's uniform.

Kamal Mughith, an expert on educational affairs at the National Center for Educational Research and Development, condemned the attempts to force girls to wear the hijab at

school, saying such practices deviate the attention from the school's main role of providing education.

Speaking to Al-Monitor, Mughith stressed "the need that the education minister goes public on whether or not he supports such practices. The hijab should be a personal matter that girls themselves need to decide on, not an obligation under the pretext of a school uniform."

Meanwhile, the New Woman Foundation circulated Oct. 21 a petition against forcing schoolgirls to wear the hijab, which dozens of institutions and public figures signed. The petition stressed the state's obligations under the constitution to guarantee the rights of women and children to citizenship without any discrimination on the basis of gender or religion.

Shawki condemned the campaign and said that he is against forcing students to wear the hijab at school. He referred to this case as "an isolated incident" that people overreacted to. He said in a TV statement Oct. 22 that such campaigns are "similar to what the malicious channels and Egypt's enemies do."

EU/France: New French Renew boss at odds with Macron on gender-violence

By [Paula Soler](#)

[EU Observer](#) (25.01.2024) – The new head of the liberal Renew Europe group, [French MEP Valérie Hayer](#), has distanced herself from French president Emmanuel Macron and the French delegation's position on an EU directive to combat violence against women.

The directive was first proposed on 8 March 2022 and — after four trilogues — it has been stalled at Council level.

About 15 member states (including Italy, Spain, Poland and Sweden) are currently in favour of including [rape as an offence](#) in the final text, said lead MEP Frances Fitzgerald, of the centre-right European People's Party, during a parliament committee on Wednesday (24 January).

But with two big countries, France and Germany opposed, this is not enough to secure a qualified majority — meaning the key parliamentary demand has failed.

"This is a big shame," co-rapporteur Evin Incir (Socialists & Democrats) told fellow MEPs in the committee, where both rapporteurs confirmed that member states will not agree to the inclusion of rape in the final text.

France has been one of the countries opposed to a consent-based rape legislation [ie, only 'yes' means yes], citing legal concerns about the EU's powers in criminal law.

Asked about the directive, Hayer (dressed in purple, the colour representing the fight for gender equality) and member of Macron's own Renaissance party, said it was a difficult question for her, adding that both the Renew and French positions were clear. "We [Renew and the French delegation] are in favour of this directive," she told EUobserver in an interview.

However, on the decision to exclude rape from the final text, she simply said: "We don't have the same position".

The directive is still expected to be negotiated and adopted in a final trilogue, where leading MEPs are keen to include a review clause so that the option of including rape as an offence can be further explored in the future.

"The direction we should move on is making what we have as strong as we possibly can," Fitzgerald said.

"This is not a white paper, there are successes, but not as many as the parliament would have wanted," the socialist MEP added.

Only second-ever female leader

Earlier on Thursday, the French MEP's nomination was fully endorsed by all members of Renew Europe, making Hayer, 37, their youngest leader ever and only the second woman to lead the liberal group.

Hayer's appointment comes just two weeks after her predecessor, Stéphane Séjourné, was sworn in as France's new foreign minister — but also as opinion polls are predicting dwindling support for the party in the upcoming June European elections.

According to [a recent study](#), Renew is expected to lose 15 seats (86), which would make it the fourth-largest force in parliament, after the far-right Identity and Democracy (ID) group, and closely followed by the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group on 85 seats.

Nevertheless, the newly-elected president says she's confident.

"I'm sure our results will be more important than the polls are saying now," Hayer told EUobserver. "We will fight against populism (...), and we'll have new colleagues from other countries".

As the current third force in the parliament, Renew decided to send a message of continuity by appointing Hayer, but also one of "hope", she told EUobserver in an interview.

"I think I'm proof that you can come from the countryside, be young, be a woman and arrive at the top positions," the Hayer said.

The last time the group was led by a woman was in the late 1980s by Simone Veil, a French lawyer and politician who was also the first woman to be president of the European parliament, back in 1979.

"It's a very important message for all young women and young people in Europe that you can have responsibility, even if you think you don't have all the chances at the beginning," she added, after almost five years as an MEP for Macron's Renaissance party.

A daughter of farmers, Hayer was a local councillor in her home region of France before joining the European parliament.

Today, the MEP is best known for her work on the EU budget and the negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), but she has also been active in mobilising civil society in France, protecting the rule of law and LGBT rights.

EU gender equality reaches new milestone: is progress accelerating?

[EIGE](#) (01.01.2024) - Ten years ago, EIGE introduced the Gender Equality Index as a marker for the status quo of gender equality in the EU. Each edition came with more or less the same conclusion: progress is at a snail's pace. However, in [this year's edition](#) we see the biggest annual jump in the overall score in the history of the Index ever: the EU is at 70.2 points out of 100!

But as ever, much lies beneath the number – and it's a nuanced picture. Carlien Scheele, EIGE's Director says:

Over the years, the EU has made progress towards gender equality. But we are also aware that it is not enough, and gains are fragile. Today, only Sweden with a score above 80 points in the Index is inching closer to gender equality. Sweden only represents 2% of the EU population. There will always be an excuse deprioritising the work on gender equality. We can't let that happen. We have to act now. Together, – at all levels. And we need to celebrate the victories. No matter the scale. It's what will keep us moving #3StepsForward.

Unpacking 70.2 - no room for complacency

Top performing countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands and Denmark continue to lead the way in the Index – as they have done over a decade.

Yet, either their progress has plateaued, or they have suffered a slip in points – as we see in countries such as Finland or France. This clearly shows that gains cannot be taken for granted. They need to be anchored and supported by measures to maintain progress.

On the other end, we see countries like Italy, Portugal and Malta who despite scoring below the EU average, have made vast improvements in gender equality in the last 10 years. So, when countries put in place measures, the pace in progress picks up.

Taking a closer look at change

About Time - unpaid care is still uneven between women and men

The gender care gap is shrinking. But not because men are shouldering more of the care work. Women are doing less. Assisting technologies, home delivery services or increased women's employment could have contributed to this change. But technology can only support some change by outsourcing a portion of care duties. Structural change will be needed to go the last mile – as Claudia Goldin, professor of economics and 2023 Nobel Prize winner, puts it “We're never going to have gender equality until we also have couple equity”.

Push for Power – progress on company boards, not so much in national parliaments

For the first time in 10 years, the number of women in parliaments and women on boards has converged at 33%.

Legislation leads the way for significant change. Legislated quotas in eight EU Member States helped to break the glass ceiling in companies, seeing more women at the top – bringing more innovation, creativity and productivity to the boardrooms. The Gender

Balance on Corporate Boards Directive – approved last year –will hopefully keep the momentum up and have a spillover effect on other EU Member States.

Now, we need more targeted action in parliaments to speed up progress in the political sphere - especially with the European Parliamentary elections in 2024.

Work To Be Done – gender-segregation in the labour market hasn't moved an inch

There has been progress in the area of work, particularly regarding flexible working opportunities. But it is striking that the labour market remains as gender segregated today as it was 10 years ago.

As the digital and green transition takes shape, more and more new jobs are created - requiring reskilling and upskilling to meet new and evolving demands in the labour market. Women are not as involved as they could be. They are step by step catching up with science technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) job demands, but the share of men in education, health and welfare (EHW) occupations is frozen. The green transition will not just create the demand for STEM skills, but it will also create new demands in the care sector where there is a shortage of people.

Far From the Finish Line?

This year's Gender Equality Index shows that progress is possible, but it remains fragile when not backed up by actions in all areas of life, across all EU Member States. The work here is not done. We need to go further. Going the distance means having an intersectional perspective - especially in climate change where gender disparities are experienced by different individuals and groups. Knowledge leads to change.

**Download this article in any EU language and with charts
[HERE](#)**

EU: More equal sharing of care would reduce workplace gender inequality

There is a direct link between the unequal division of un-paid care in households and gender inequality in the labour market, according to a study by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE).

EIGE (03.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/33TjTRb> - Across the EU, the bulk of unpaid care work is done by women, with 92 % providing un-paid care several days a week – as opposed to 68 % of men. Employed women also do more than their fair share of unpaid care work. Across the EU, they spend 90 minutes more per day than employed men on unpaid care.

“The benefits of dividing care work more evenly are clear. Countries with a more equal sharing of unpaid care between women and men, tend to have higher employment rates for women and lower gender gaps in earnings,” said Carlien Scheele, EIGE’s Director.

Balancing the care gap

An unequal sharing of care limits women’s job prospects and is a major reason behind the gender pay gap. One way to balance the uneven sharing of unpaid care work is through the use of childcare services. EIGE’s research shows that childcare services lead

to higher financial returns for women, compared to men. Women with children under 12 years using childcare services at least 14 hours a week are estimated to earn 4.8 % more on an hourly basis, compared to women who do not outsource childcare. The estimated difference for men is 2.6 %. Yet 14 % of households across the EU report unmet needs for childcare services. For half of them, it's because of the unaffordable cost.

Gender inequality in the paid care sector

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of care for a well-functioning society and economy. Yet the assumption that caring is still women's work, even when paid, contributes to its undervaluation. Currently, women make up 37 million of the 49 million care workers in the EU. Many find themselves in low paid, temporary jobs, with little career prospects.

What needs to change?

For a fairer distribution of unpaid care, we need a dual approach that would support both an equal sharing of care at the family level and accessible, quality care services. First, we need changes at the household level, so that an equal sharing of care tasks between women and men becomes the norm. Second, it is important that people have access to affordable, professional care services that can help tackle the rising care needs expected in the EU as the population ages.

Background

The forthcoming report 'Gender inequalities in care and consequences for the labour market' is part of EIGE's work on monitoring the EU's progress towards its gender equality commitments under the Beijing Platform for Action. It was prepared at the request of the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The finalised report will be published on EIGE's website in January 2021.

For media enquiries, please contact Veronica Collins, +370 5 2157 449, veronica.collins@eige.europa.eu.

EU: Sex workers struggle to survive Covid-19 pandemic

Criminalization makes a bad situation worse.

By Skye Wheeler

HRW (04.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3dJeVsu> - Covid-19 presents a new problem for sex workers. In-person sex work is intimate by its very nature, and workers are at heightened risk of contracting the virus if they keep working. But without work, as strip clubs close and clients dwindle, sex workers struggle to survive.

In many countries in Europe, sex work is criminalized directly or indirectly through legal systems such as the "Scandinavian model," which makes buying sex illegal. Sex workers, who are forced to work in the informal economy, find themselves excluded from emergency assistance available to other workers.

A [new report](#) by the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSWE) notes that sex workers in the continent live in the "economic margins" and

often have less savings and government support to fall back on. They are also rarely benefitting from pandemic response and recovery plans.”

Sex workers are often from groups that are already marginalized economically and socially, such as undocumented migrants, people of color, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, some of whom have been pushed out of their families due to homophobia. Sex work may, for them, be one option among bad ones. The ICRSWE report also predicts that hard economic times may mean more people will turn to sex work.

The report asks European governments to issue urgent moratoriums on raids, arrests, and prosecutions for sex work, provide financial support to sex workers, and ensure sex worker-led organizations are included in distribution of emergency assistance.

In the longer term, as the ICRSWE argues, governments should carry out meaningful consultations with sex workers to establish a framework that “respects their human rights and improves their safety and working conditions.”

States that criminalize sex work should work towards decriminalization. Human Rights Watch has documented the harmful impact of laws criminalizing sex work in countries including South Africa, Tanzania, and the United States. We call for decriminalization of sex work everywhere because, as this new report says, decriminalization helps protect sex workers from violence and is an important step towards ending harmful stigmatization.

EU: Coronavirus puts women in the frontline

EIGE (25.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2R0DBUz> - In Europe, we are all adjusting to new ways of living because of the effects of the coronavirus. We are learning what it means to self-quarantine, work from home, home-school children, lose a job or even a loved one. Each person’s situation is different, but for sure, the coronavirus will reveal the different realities of women and men.

At the frontline of this coronavirus pandemic are the healthcare workers who are working around the clock and putting themselves at risk to care for patients. Most of the nurses and healthcare workers in the EU are women. Their workload is very demanding, often taking an emotional toll. Yet their profession is one of the most undervalued, and under-paid jobs in the EU.

Men’s mortality rate is higher

Preliminary figures show that women and men are being infected by the coronavirus in about equal numbers, but the mortality rate is higher for men than for women [1]. The World Health Organization recommends to keep up healthy food and exercise habits to boost the immune system and avoid unhealthy ones such as smoking and consuming excessive alcohol. More men smoke than women and are therefore more likely to be at risk of developing a serious disease if infected with the virus.

Extra challenges for public transport users

Our Gender Equality Index findings show that women rely much more on public transportation than men. This puts women at greater risk of coming into contact with the virus, when they have to either get to work, visit a doctor or do the grocery shopping. This is especially the case with single parents, who are less likely to have a car due to

financial reasons. 18 % of them say that public transport is the only method of transport available to them. In countries where restrictions on movement have tightened, public transport has been reduced or even shut down. This makes life more difficult for people who rely on these services and still need to get to work, visit a doctor or do the grocery shopping

Concern for severe job losses in women-dominated professions

The closure or near-closure of many businesses could have a severe effect on many women-dominated professions. Flight attendants, tour operators, sales assistants, hotel cleaners and hairdressers are often already in precarious jobs and will probably not be paid nor entitled to paid sick leave. These people are likely to have difficulty paying for basic necessities such as groceries, rent and bills in the coming days and months. EIGE's research shows that a quarter of women employees across the EU are in a precarious job. For migrants, the situation is even worse. Nearly one in three non-EU born women (35 %) and one in four men (24 %) work in precarious jobs.

Unpaid care work will increase

Even without a crisis, caring responsibilities usually fall heavily on women. Now with the closure of schools and workplaces, their unpaid workload is likely to further increase. If older relatives get sick, they will also need looking after. The situation for single parents can be even more difficult, especially when options for informal childcare are unavailable.

Physical distancing is not an option for everyone

In the EU, nearly a quarter of households depend on informal care from relatives or friends. As physical distancing and confinement measures become the norm, it will become harder for family, friends and neighbours to provide or receive such care.

There are also many people in our society, for whom physical distancing is not an option. We have 61 million women and 47 million men with disabilities in the EU. Many of them depend on help from others to eat, dress or shower, which makes physical distancing almost impossible. Across the EU, most of the professional carers working with people with disabilities or older people are women (83 %).

Domestic abuse increases in times of crisis

These times of social isolation increase the risk of domestic abuse. Women in violent relationships are stuck at home and exposed to their abuser for longer periods of time. This makes it very difficult for them to call helplines as the perpetrator is always around. It can also be harder for women to leave their abuser once the crisis is over, due to the financial insecurity that might follow.

Neighbours or relatives can have an important role in contacting the police if they suspect that violence is occurring, especially when the victim is not able to call for help.

Where are women decision-makers?

While nurses are working non-stop behind the scenes in hospitals to look after patients, we mostly see men out in the public domain, making the news headlines. They are the ones who hold most of the positions of power in our society. In this crisis, it is usually men who are making all the important decisions, which affect the everyday lives of citizens. This imbalance of decision-making power means that women are left out from shaping the decisions that affect their own lives.

Policy measures must consider the different needs of women and men

The response from policymakers must consider the different experiences faced by women and men during a pandemic to ensure that everyone gets the help they most need. There is a big need for sex-disaggregated data to fully understand how women and men are affected by the virus. Not only for infection rates, but also the economic impacts, the distribution of care work and the extent of domestic violence. It is also time for leaders to recognise and give more value to the important work done by those who are in the frontlines of a health crisis, such as healthcare workers, home carers and domestic workers.

EU: Women's rights: MEPs call for action to fight backlash against gender equality

MEPs set their priorities for the upcoming UN Commission on the Status of Women and call for the EU to take strong action against all measures undermining women's rights.

European Parliament News (13.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/37Fx2w4> - Ahead of the 64th UN Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW64) in New York in March, Parliament spelled out its priorities on Thursday.

In a resolution adopted by 463 votes in favour, 108 against and 50 abstentions, MEPs deplore that many of the challenges identified by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 25 years ago are still relevant today.

They call on the Council to ensure a unified EU position and act to counter the backlash against gender equality and all measures undermining women's rights.

Setting out their priorities for the upcoming UNCSW session in March, MEPs call for measures boosting women's economic and political empowerment:

- greater inclusion of women in the labour market;
- more support for female entrepreneurship;
- close the gender pay gap (16%) and pension gap (37%);
- favour domestic and care responsibilities being shared equally;
- promote education for girls and encourage greater participation in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) careers;
- promote gender-balanced representation at all levels of decision-making, and
- unblock the "Women on Boards Directive" in the Council.

To step up protection of women, the EU should:

- urgently conclude the EU ratification of the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women;
- allocate adequate resources to combat gender-based violence and protect victims, and
- protect and promote the rights of groups experiencing multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination, e.g. women with disabilities, women of colour, migrant women and LGBTIQ people.

The EU must act globally by:

- promoting and supporting the inclusion of a specific gender chapter in all future EU trade and investment agreements;

condemning the US 'global gag' rule, which cuts US funding for international organisations if they provide or lobby for abortion services; significantly supporting funding for sexual and reproductive health and rights, and promoting greater participation of women in climate action, peacekeeping, peacebuilding and mediation processes.

Background

The Beijing Declaration was adopted by the UN at the end of the 4th World Conference on Women on 15 September 1995 to promulgate a set of principles on the equality of men and women. The Platform for Action called for strategic actions in areas such as economy, education, health, violence and decision-making.

EU: New study published: Gender-based asylum claims and non-refoulement: Articles 60 and 61 of the Istanbul Convention

Council of Europe (10.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2HzN6Fc> - A new publication is now available on [Gender-based asylum claims and non-refoulement: Articles 60 and 61 of the Istanbul Convention](#). This publication belongs to a series of in-depth analyses of articles of the Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention).

The series includes analyses of Articles 11 (ensuring data collection and research on violence against women and domestic violence), 12 (preventing violence against women), 13 (raising awareness of violence against women), 16 (domestic and sexual violence perpetrator programmes) and 17 (encouraging the participation of the private sector and the media in the prevention of violence against women and domestic violence), and a collection of papers on Article 52 aimed at facilitating the implementation of articles of the Istanbul Convention.

Articles 60 and 61 of the Istanbul Convention concern gender-based asylum claims and non-refoulement, respectively. The purpose of this publication is to support the implementation of these articles by providing policy makers, border and immigration officials and practitioners with practical advice including definitions, information and examples of: gender-based violence that may be recognised as forms of persecution or other serious harm, how to ensure that a gender-sensitive interpretation is given to each of the convention grounds, what are the requirements of gender-sensitive reception procedures and gender-sensitive practice and procedure in respect of refugee status determination, and applications for other forms of international protection. It discusses the additional protection of the non-refoulement principle and concludes with a checklist which summarises the requirements of the provisions affecting asylum-seeking and refugee women in Articles 60 and 61 of the Istanbul Convention.

The checklist should help in designing and implementing measures in law, policy and practice to implement Articles 60 and 61.

GREECE: Greek parliament elects country's first female president

MPs overwhelmingly back Katerina Sakellaropoulou's appointment with PM hailing it as 'a window to the future.'

By Helena Smith

The Guardian (22.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2RAr7Ue> - A high court judge and ardent human rights advocate has been elected Greece's first female president in a historic vote by parliament.

Inaugurating a new era for one of Europe's more traditional nations, MPs overwhelmingly endorsed the nomination of Katerina Sakellaropoulou as head of state. No woman has held the post in the nearly 200 years since Greece proclaimed independence. "Today a window to the future has opened," said the prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, after 261 deputies in the 300-seat House voted in favour of the French-educated jurist assuming the role. "Our country enters the third decade of the 21st century with more optimism."

The election – less than a week after the centre-right leader proposed Sakellaropoulou – not only breaks with tradition in an EU state where few women hold political positions but has taken many in Mitsotakis' own New Democracy party aback.

The 63-year-old, who first made history fifteen months ago when she was elevated to the helm of the highest court in the land by the leftist administration then in power, holds liberal views with an emphasis on environmental protection. But with no known party allegiance she is a political outsider.

The diminutive Sakellaropoulou cut a defiantly modernist figure as she officially accepted her appointment by a cross-party group of mostly male MPs headed by the president of the parliament in her office on Wednesday. Signalling her determination to act as a moral compass in a society often riven by political division, and singling out the climate emergency among the global challenges facing the country, she told the delegation: "I look forward to a society which respects rights ... heals the wounds of the past and looks with optimism at the future."

Her election was immediately applauded by the EU commission chief, Ursula von der Leyen, in a tweet praising Greece for "moving ahead into a new era of equality".

An expert in environmental and constitutional law, Sakellaropoulou will take the oath of office on 13 March, when she will formally succeed Prokipsis Pavlopoulos, a former conservative minister who has held the largely ceremonial position for the past five years.

Raised in Thessaloniki, Greece's northern metropolis, she is the daughter of a supreme court judge and lives in a part of central Athens eschewed by most politicians.

Worldly and well read, her career has been defined at the vanguard of a minority of jurists unafraid to clash with prevailing sentiment in pursuit of the rule of law. Despite nationalist frenzy two decades ago she stood her ground as a leading proponent of removing religious affiliation from civilian identity cards, a reform demanded by the EU but vigorously opposed at the time by conservatives and the country's powerful Orthodox church. In a nation on the forefront of the refugee crisis, Sakellaropoulou has also supported citizenship being granted to migrant children.

As Greece enters 2020 after a decade of battling its worst economic crisis in modern times, the appointment of a woman to the country's highest office has raised hopes that a new page is finally being turned.

Greek female MPs voiced optimism that the president-elect could serve as a role model to younger generations in a nation still getting to grips with the idea of gender equality.

A mere five women currently hold cabinet positions – a scarcity that earned Mitsotakis wide criticism when his government assumed power in July.

Despite protests from some in the opposition that Sakellaropoulou lacked political clout, the rare consensus with which MPs supported her nomination in the first round of what could have been a five-round vote buttressed optimism on Wednesday.

In the past the failure of parliament to elect a president had frequently fuelled dissent, triggering early elections that have spurred further political tumult.

INDIA: 'It's not a grave we must fit in': the Kashmir women fighting for marital rights

Women are slowly gaining rights and finding the strength to shake off the social taboos around ending a bad relationship.

By Furkan Latif Khan

The Guardian (09.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/38hhl0J> - Parveena Jabeen was all set to get married, but in Kashmir weddings are extravagant affairs.

Traditionally, brides in the valley of Kashmir would take a trousseau with them to the groom's house, including clothes, jewellery, makeup, gifts for the in-laws and even furniture.

Jabeen's father died when she was 19 and so, as the eldest of four, she worked as a tutor to feed her family. In August 2019, when Kashmir was put under a political lockdown, she lost her job.

Jabeen was worried that she might be mocked if she asked relatives for help, but then she heard of a group that supported women. "I approached them because I felt that they would not talk about helping us throughout the town," she says.

Kashmir weddings, an important social function, are notorious for their extravagance and at times the state has intervened to put restrictions on expenses.

"Families end up selling their properties, taking out loans, for unnecessary social customs. We don't want to encourage that practice, so we do not buy gifts for in-laws or home furnishings," says Shehryar Khanum, a founding member of Mehram, a charity to help struggling brides.

The organisation also supports new brides and women trying to leave bad marriages. "She explained to me how I should take care of myself after marriage, to be vigilant and responsible. She insisted that I should not give up work, no matter what happens, because that is the only way to keep my future secure," says Jabeen.

This advice is essential, says Khanum: "We come across so many women who are asked to give up work after marriage. It is an unspoken rule that this is a reasonable thing to say, which it is not," she says. "In Kashmir very few women are upfront about their rights – religious or legal. As an organisation, we believe that they should be."

In Kashmir, tradition has a big impact on decision-making, says Prof Muzammil Jan, who has studied Kashmiri women's changing roles in society. "Even religion is misused in the context of women's empowerment."

"The majority of women's decisions are forced on them by male decision-making power, whether she is married or unmarried."

Most marriages are under sharia law, where a document is signed by both the bride and the groom, and the clauses are often seen as set and so are rarely edited. But Mehram is trying to change that. "We are working on a model, nikkah-naama, where we want to include the rights of the bride in writing," says Khanum.

While the Indian constitution has been adjusting to enshrine women's rights, the legal structure of Kashmir has been slower to catch up. In August 2019, a constitutional amendment withdrew Kashmir's special status, extending laws from India to the region, and it is now possible for women to demand compensation for abuse in a marriage, as well as medical expenses and residential rights.

"The new laws aim to provide women with legal remedies by way of independent adjudicating bodies like family courts. These laws give women right to claim maintenance from court under exclusive provisions," says Viqas Malik, a lawyer in Kashmir.

But bureaucracy is slow. The state's only women's commission was disbanded and it is not yet known when a new one will be established. There is little trust in legal structures to deliver justice to women.

"Institutions here are almost always inclined towards reconciliation. That means that you are overlooking justice and replacing it with what is socially acceptable, which may not always be just," says Khanum.

Sarah Mir (not her real name), 35, has been frequenting Mehram's office for several months. Mir's marriage was arranged by her brother. "I met my husband for the first time on the day of my ring ceremony. I barely saw his face. I saw his face on the photos of the ceremony later," she says.

Mir found she was expected to be her husband's housemaid. "I was disrespected, neglected and even beaten by him," she says. "But I did not share any of the abuse with my family because I did not want to worry them."

Eight months into her marriage, Mir's father died and she went home. "Eventually, he came with all his family members, asking me to adjust to the life I was given and only then I would be accepted back in his family."

Mir registered complaints against her husband with multiple agencies but nothing persuaded him to discuss the marriage. Even her local police station did not file a complaint, Mir claims. "He wants the divorce to take place in a cave, so that the judgment is in his favour," says Mir.

In Kashmir, the predominant body for marital settlements are mohalla committees, a group of local people, who are invited to mediate by the families. But most mohalla

committees are headed by men, says Khanum. "So it is often just a superimposition of the social view, rather than justice."

Mir sees no solution yet in sight but visits to Mehram have been therapeutic. "I am thankful, for the mental support. Otherwise, I feel like I would have committed suicide," she says. "Most women going through distressed marriages struggle to find support and are told that marriage is a grave and they must fit in it."

Mehram is trying to fill that void. "Right now, I think some women are here just to talk. We are trying to create a space where women feel that it is their place, talk to each other and share their experiences," says Khanum.

There is a WhatsApp group where women can share insights on their legal and marital rights.

"I faced a lot of problems while growing up. And I was worried that I would not be able to sustain if I face marital problems. But after joining this group and getting in touch with other women, I have been feeling so much more secure," says Jabeen. "I feel supported."

INDIA: India's COVID-19 gender blind spot

India's women stand to lose from the country's COVID-19 policies in many ways.

By Bansari Kamdar

The Diplomat (27.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3eVEybf> - The second most populous country in the world, India, has been under a nationwide lockdown since March 24, 2020 – one it intends to continue till May 3, 2020. At the time of writing, there have been a total of 27,890 confirmed cases and 882 deaths from the pandemic in India. While most agree that the lockdown was necessary to contain the spread of the coronavirus, the problem remains in how it was implemented.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's eager and abrupt lockdown policy came with many blind spots – putting the country's most vulnerable at a disproportionately greater risk than others. According to The Print, nearly 200 people, largely migrant workers, have died during the lockdown due exhaustion, hunger, denial of medical care, suicide, and even vigilante killings.

Women, who make up around half the nation's population, also remained largely absent from the government's COVID-19 policy, to the extent that the government had to be reminded that feminine hygiene products like sanitary napkins were essential items during the lockdown.

A rise in domestic violence

There has been an uptick of intimate partner violence (IPV) cases around the globe associated with lockdown policies, from the United States and United Kingdom to France, China, and India. In their eagerness to flatten the curve and limit the spread of coronavirus, government-instituted lockdowns may be endangering the lives of women, particularly in the absence of policies to check and balance against the rising violence against women.

In India, a woman is subjected to an act of domestic violence every 4.4 minutes, according to the Crime in India Report 2018 by the Indian National Crime Research Bureau (NCRB). One in three women will experience intimate partner violence in their lifetimes. There is already an uptick in these cases, with the National Commission for Women (NCW) in India registering 587 cases between March 23 and April 16, up from 396 cases between February 27 and March 22, reports Al Jazeera.

In response, the NCW has also recently launched a WhatsApp number making it easier for women to ask for help, alongside a helpline and email option.

Past research has shown that domestic violence cases rise significantly as mobility restrictions foster more tension and strain in the household over security, health, and job losses. State governments in India have been encouraging women to report violence and India's Women and Child Development Minister Smriti Irani asked the states to ensure that women's helplines are functioning. However, this may not be enough.

IPV cases are often gravely underreported. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) of 2015-2016, less than 1 percent of the victims of domestic abuse sought help. Women's limited mobility and lack of access to helplines and the internet could greatly limit this reporting. Only 29 percent of Indian women have access to the internet, according to a recent UNICEF report.

In New York City, while calls to domestic violence helplines dropped, organizations helping women find emergency shelter observed a steep increase with one showing a 35 percent increase in calls from women looking for shelter. However, shelters for victims of abuse in India remain unsafe and inadequate.

There is a dire need for a policy, like the one in France, where the government provides abuse victims with a place to stay away from their abusers. Additionally, reaching these women in distress has to be constituted as an "essential service" in India.

India's falling female labor force participation rate

Women face increased financial instability in times of crisis. According to a report by Bain & Company and Google, women were already the worst hit by India's unemployment crisis. While the overall Indian unemployment rate was at 7 percent before the lockdown, it was already as high as 18 percent for women.

As the pandemic worsens India's unemployment problem, women will often be the first to let go when firms start cutting costs given cultural norms devaluing women's work and also because women are less likely to work in sectors where telecommuting is possible.

According to the Indian government's Periodic Labor Force Survey (PLFS) of 2017-18 by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), only one of four women aged 15 years and above are working or seeking work. India has one of the lowest female labor participation rates in the world and it has been falling over the past decade. The World Economic Forum ranks India the fifth lowest (149th) on its Global Gender Gap Report on economic participation and opportunity metric, trailed only by Pakistan, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq.

In response to the crisis, the Indian government has announced cash transfers of 500 rupees (\$6.50) to the women who have a Jan Dhan account over the course of the next three months, but that may be inadequate as many lose their jobs and economic mobility.

Furthermore, according to the International Labor Organization (ILO), 81 percent of Indian women work in the informal economy. The informal sector, which makes up a

majority of the Indian economy, is the worst hit by the coronavirus-imposed economic slowdown and requires targeted economic policies, government bailouts, and support measures. The economic costs of the lockdown may be disproportionately borne by women in the end.

The additional burden of care

One of the primary reasons that women leave the workforce or do not enter it in the first place is their unpaid caregiving responsibilities at home. Longstanding patriarchal social norms and cultural expectations have put the burden of caring for children, the elderly, and the household on Indian women.

In India, according to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), women perform nearly 6 hours of unpaid work each day, while men spend a paltry 52 minutes. This burden is likely to increase amid the lockdown as Indian men continue to not help in the household.

Not only does the burden of unpaid work limit women's economic mobility and time, there are also dangerous consequences to women neglecting them. Nearly 41 percent of participants in a survey by OXFAM India stated that it was acceptable to beat a woman if she failed to prepare a meal for the men in the family and one in three thought that it was acceptable to beat women who failed to care for children or left a dependent unattended.

Girls education and nutrition

According to a recent statement by the Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, the gross educational enrollment of girls is higher than boys in India. However, their mean years of schooling remain almost half that of boys, with girls getting 4.7 years of schooling in comparison to 8.2 years of schooling for boys. Girls are spending nearly half as many years in school as boys. With the economic downturn, girls' education could be even less prioritized.

Nearly 96 percent of children in rural India are studying in government-run schools that provide cooked mid-day meals to children. With the schools shut down till May, children's education is likely to suffer, along with an increase in malnourishment. The situation will worsen for girls as they are more dependent on the mid-day meal programs given the gendered nature of nutrition provision in households with limited resources

The way forward

These are just a few examples of how pandemics often heighten gender inequities and affect men and women differently. Disasters expose and intensify the systemic and structural cracks in the current system and lockdown has shown that gender-blind policies could worsen these issues and leave women and girls more vulnerable than ever.

As the lockdown begins to be lifted or partially lifted around the country, India urgently needs gender-sensitive policies addressing the increasing violence against women, the widening gender disparities in labor force participation, rising school dropouts and malnutrition among girls, and women's disproportionate unpaid work and caregiving responsibilities.

INDIA: Indian women protest new citizenship laws, joining a global 'fourth wave' feminist movement

By Alka Kurian

The Conversation (24.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2PrKihE> - Women are among the strongest opponents of two new laws in India that threaten the citizenship rights of vulnerable groups like Muslims, poor women, oppressed castes and LGBTQ people.

The Citizenship Amendment Act, passed in December 2019, fast-tracks Indian citizenship for undocumented refugees from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan – but only those who are non-Muslim. Another law - the National Register of Citizens – will require all residents in India to furnish extensive legal documentation to prove their citizenship as soon as 2021.

Critics see the two laws as part of the government's efforts to redefine the meaning of belonging in India and make this constitutionally secular country a Hindu nation.

Since Dec. 4, 2019, Indians of all ages, ethnicities and religions have been protesting the new citizenship initiatives in scattered but complementary nationwide demonstrations. The uprisings have persisted through weeks of arrests, beatings and even killings across India by the police.

But the most enduring pocket of resistance is an around-the-clock sit-in of mostly hijab-wearing women in a working-class Delhi neighborhood called Shaheen Bagh.

Women take charge

Since Dec. 15, 2019, women of all ages – from students to 90-year-old grandmothers – have abandoned their daily duties and braved near-freezing temperatures to block a major highway in the Indian capital.

This is a striking act of resistance in a patriarchal country where women – but particularly Muslim women – have historically had their rights denied.

The Shaheen Bagh protests are as novel in their methods as they are in their makeup. Protesters are using artwork, book readings, lectures, poetry recitals, songs, interfaith prayers and communal cooking to explain their resistance to citizenship laws that, they say, will discriminate against not just Muslims but also women, who usually don't have state or property papers in their own names.

On Jan. 11, women in the Indian city of Kolkata performed a Bengali-language version of a Chilean feminist anthem called "The Rapist is You." This choreographed public flash dance, first staged in Santiago, Chile in November 2019, calls out the police, judiciary and government for violating women's human rights.

A dangerous place for women

India is the world's most dangerous country for women, according to the Thompson Reuters Foundation. One-third of married women are physically abused. Two-thirds of rapes go unpunished.

Gender discrimination is so pervasive that around 1 million female fetuses are aborted each year. In some parts of India, there are 126 men for every 100 women.

Indian women have come together in protest before, to speak out against these and other issues. But most prior women's protests were limited in scope and geography. The 2012 brutal gang rape and murder of a 23-year-old Delhi woman – which sparked nationwide protests – was a watershed moment. All at once, the country witnessed the power of women's rage.

The current women-led anti-citizenship law demonstrations are even greater in number and power. Beyond Shaheen Bagh, Indian women across caste, religion and ethnicity are putting their bodies and reputations on the line.

Female students are intervening to shield fellow students from police violence at campus protests. Actresses from Bollywood, India's film industry, are speaking out against gender violence, too.

Women's secular agenda

With their non-violent tactics and inclusive strategy, the Shaheen Bagh women are proving to be effective critics of the government's Hindu-centric agenda. Their leaderless epicenter of resistance raises up national symbols like the Indian flag, the national anthem and the Indian Constitution as reminders that India is secular and plural – a place where people can be both Muslim and Indian.

The Shaheen Bagh movement's novel and enduring strategy has triggered activism elsewhere in the country.

Thousands of women in the northern Indian city of Lucknow started their own sit-in in late January. Similar "Shaheen Baghs" have sprung up since, in the cities of Patna and even Chennai, which is located 1,500 miles from Delhi.

Global women's spring

India's Shaheen Bagh protests form part of a broader global trend in women's movements. Worldwide, female activists are combining attention to women's issues with a wider call for social justice across gender, class and geographic borders.

In January 2019 alone, women in nearly 90 countries took to the streets demanding equal pay, reproductive rights and the end of violence. Young women were also at the forefront of the 2019 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, Lebanon, Sudan, Brazil and Colombia.

As I write in my 2017 book, such inclusive activism is the defining characteristic of what's called "fourth wave feminism."

There isn't a common definition of the first three feminist waves. In the United States, they generally refer to the early 20th century suffragette movement, the radical women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the more mainstream feminism of the 1990s and early 2000s.

Fourth wave feminism appears to be more universal. Today's activists fully embrace the idea that women's freedom means little if other groups are still oppressed. With its economic critique, disavowal of caste oppression and solidarity across religious divides, India's Shaheen Bagh sit-in shares attributes with the women's uprisings in Chile, Lebanon, Hong Kong and beyond.

The last time women came together in such numbers worldwide was the #MeToo movement, a campaign against sexual harassment which emerged on social media in the United States in 2017 and quickly spread across the globe.

Shaheen Bagh and similarly far-reaching women's uprisings underway in other countries take #MeToo to the next level, moving from a purely feminist agenda to a wider call for social justice. Women protesters want rights – not just for themselves, but human rights for all.

INDIA: Landmark ruling grants women equal rights in Indian army

By Swati Gupta

CNN (17.02.2020) <https://cnn.it/32wU3Ra> - India's Supreme Court ruled on Monday in favor of equal rights in the armed forces, ordering the government to grant permanent commission and command positions to women officers on par with men.

The judgment, seen as a landmark decision for the Indian military, means that all women will now be eligible for the same promotions, ranks, benefits and pensions as their male counterparts, irrespective of their years of service or whether they had retired.

Female officers have long campaigned for this change, which will allow them to serve a full tenure and achieve a higher rank, with greater salary and leadership potential. Currently, women are inducted into the army through short service commissions, which only permit them to serve for 10 to 14 years.

"This change will lift up women -- not just in the army but all girls across the country and the world," said Lt. Col. Seema Singh to reporters after the court ruling.

Though the court's ruling does not permit women to serve in army combat units, like the infantry or artillery corps, they are now eligible to command entire battalions or head the intelligence department. Promotions to command positions will be considered on a case-by-case basis, said Archana Pathak Dave, one of the lawyers representing the female officers.

The decision comes after the government told the court that female officers were not physically and physiologically suitable to hold permanent commissions in the armed forces.

"Women officers must deal with pregnancy, motherhood and domestic obligations towards their children and families and may not be well suited to the life of a soldier in the armed forces," the central government stated.

The court said that the government's arguments were based on discriminatory gender stereotypes, and rejected their plea to overturn a 2010 Delhi high court order on the same policy.

In its 2010 ruling, the Delhi court stated: "A PC (Permanent Commission) carries with it certain privileges of rank, including pension. These women officers have served well the armed forces of the country in the areas of operation they were recruited for and have worked in this capacity for 14 to 15 years. They deserved better from the respondents."

"In matters of gender discrimination a greater sensitivity is expected and required," it added.

The Indian government agreed last year to give permanent commissions to women, but said it would only apply to female officers who had served less than 14 years -- excluding hundreds of women who had already served out their short service commissions.

Aishwary Bhati, one of the lawyers representing female officers, said the government's decision denied women a route to leadership positions: "It is not about money, it is about career prospects."

In handing down its verdict on Monday, the Supreme Court delivered a powerful defense of equality, saying in the judgment that it was time for change in India's armed forces.

"The time has come for a realization that women officers in the army are not adjuncts to a male dominated establishment whose presence must be 'tolerated' within narrow confines," the court said.

IRAN bans women from stadiums, again

Women were not allowed to attend the last World Cup qualifying match played yesterday in Mashhad. Out of 12,500 tickets sold online, at least 2,000 were reserved for women. Women stage a protest outside the stadium for a right won after a long struggle. For a local Islamic leader, women's presence is a form of "vulgarity".

Asia News (30.03.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3DqOI07> - Iranian authorities have again banned women from entering stadiums to watch football matches, overturning [a long battle](#) that saw a [young woman](#) set herself on fire in protest and die.

Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, women have been excluded from all sporting events and venues where men compete in teams or individually.

According to reports from the semi-official *ISNA* news agency, women were banned from attending the last qualifying match for the Qatar 2022 World Cup, set for the end of the year.

Iran has already qualified for the competition, the first country in Asia to do so. However, FIFA, the world football governing body, had ordered Iran to allow women access to stadiums as a prerequisite for admitting its team's participation in the competition.

Local sources say that out of 12,500 tickets sold online, at least 2,000 were reserved for women for a game played with Lebanon in the north-eastern city of Mashhad, which ended with two nil score in favour of the home team.

A video circulating on social media shows hundreds of female soccer fans chanting "we object" in response to the decision to ban them from attending the match.

So far no one has taken responsibility for the ban. *Khabaronline*, an Iranian news website, said that "despite tickets being sold, women are still not allowed to attend [matches at] the stadium."

Ahmad Alamolhoda, Friday prayer leader in Mashhad, who was appointed by the country's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said he was always against women's

presence as spectators in men's sports competitions. In his view their attendance is a form of "vulgarity."

In a post-match interview, team captain Alireza Jahanbakhsh said it would be great to see women in stadiums in the future because they too enjoy seeing the country's team.

For the first time in decades, hundreds of Iranian women were allowed to attend the Asian Champions League final match in 2019 between Persepolis and the Japanese Kashima Antlers in Tehran.

Last January, more than 2,000 women went to Azadi stadium to watch the match in which Iran defeated Iraq and clinched a spot at the World Cup.

IRAN: Iran implements law allowing women to pass their nationality to their children

The former laws of the Islamic Republic only allowed men to pass nationality.

By Somayeh Malekian

ABC News (25.06.2020) - <https://abcn.ws/3ieXaEL> - Writing down her dreams in her diary notebook was the first thing Samaneh, a 16-year-old undocumented Iranian-Bengali, did after she learned she might officially get an Iranian ID.

"My daughter was over the moon when I told her the law was changed and she could get Shenاسnameh [an Iranian official ID card] through me. All she wants is to go to school and to the gym," Samaneh's mother told ABC News. She, like others interviewed in the story, did not want her name and her daughter's full name mentioned for personal reasons.

Samaneh is one of about one million undocumented children born to Iranian mothers and non-Iranian fathers who have had many challenges in accessing education, medical and other services because they were not recognized as Iranian nationals.

The former laws of the Islamic Republic only allowed men to pass nationality, so children of foreign national fathers and Iranian women were not considered Iranian. But, with the new law which will go into effect in two weeks, women will confer their nationality to their children like men, the spokesman of the government Ali Rabiei said, according to the Islamic Republic News Agency.

Most of the men with foreign nationalities who marry Iranian women are refugees from Iran's neighboring countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, Fatemeh Ashrafi, head of HAMI, an association for protection of refugee women and children, told ABC News.

"More than 100,000 Iranian women are married to [foreign men], mostly from neighboring countries," Ashrafi said.

"I hope the news is true," said Khaleghzadeh, a mother of five undocumented children to an Afghan father who still cannot believe the long ordeal of her children is over.

"If my children get Iranian IDs, they can go to work without being constantly worried about getting arrested and deported to Afghanistan," she added.

As Ashrafi said, the law is as much about women's rights as it is about refugees and their children. "This law helps women regain an important part of their rights," she said.

"I can't forget how terribly I was shocked when after my marriage I realized my children could not get Iranian ID despite the fact that I was Iranian," Samaneh's mother said. "I felt I wasn't a full person."

"I am happy that I can get my name registered at state schools like my other friends and can rejoin the kabaddi team," Samaneh said. She was a member of the kabaddi team at the gym in her neighborhood, but could not stay with the team after they made it to the next round of the city champion league, as she was undocumented.

"Lack of access to free education or work permission is not the only problem my children have, they are tired of being constantly humiliated for having an Afghan father," Khaleghzadeh said. "Now, they are happy that they can be recognized as Iranian."

The pain of being seen as inferior is what many Afghans and children of Afghan refugees complain about in Iran.

"One of the toughest things I have to deal with on a daily basis is hiding the nationality of my father. People would think of me as a lesser person if they realized my dad was Bengali," Samaneh said.

However, Ashrafi believes that the social discrimination against non-Iranians has historical reasons and is not a problem that can be solved merely by changing a law. "It is a deeper issue that needs a rather long-term cultural and social approach. This law is not going to help the wrong with that social damage," she said.

Khaleghzadeh has a 25-year-old undocumented pregnant daughter, also married to an undocumented Afghan refugee, who does not have a work permit in Iran. "If she can get my Iranian nationality, then she can pass it to her baby, too," she said. "At least they can get the cash subsidies from the government for the times her husband does not work," she added.

Iran distributes monthly cash subsidies of about \$2.50 per person. The humble amount still means a lot to families with no income in destitute areas of the country including border provinces like Sistan and Baluchistan, home to many families with Iranian mothers and Afghan refugee fathers.

Over a million Afghan refugees are officially registered in Iran. The number of undocumented Afghans is about 2.5 million, the government spokesperson said.

"Many of such marriages are a result of the poverty of families of these women in border provinces. Around 80% of women married to refugees in Iran are illiterate or barely literate and live in the slums. They are hardly aware of their rights, so they marry refugees sometimes for a small sum of money that is not inconsiderable for these families," Ashrafi said.

Although the implementation of the new law is the last hope of many families, experts believe it may cause problems as it contains some contradictions and loopholes.

"This bill is inconsistent with the Constitution, at some points. One of them is the ambiguity of the new regulations about dual nationals," Ashrafi said.

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran does not recognize dual nationality. It has left some families in obscurity whose children have already been granted their fathers' nationality.

"Both of my daughters have Iraqi ID," said Kolsum, an Iranian woman who lives with her Iraqi husband and her daughters in Baghdad. She is not sure if her daughters are eligible to get Iranian ID as they already are recognized as Iraqi nationals.

"I know the problem with dual nationality in Iran's constitution, but I really like my daughters to get Shenاسنامه, because it saves all the visa hassle we have at the border every time we want to visit my family in Iran," she said.

IRAN: U.S. "maximum pressure" on Iran hurts the women it claims to help

To help justify its coercive measures against the Islamic Republic, Washington often evokes Iranian women's struggles for inclusion and equality. But evidence from today's Iran shows that U.S. policies are instead contributing to holding women back.

By Azadeh Moaveni & Ali Vaez

International Crisis Group (06.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3aJ1UOW> - On 21 May 2018, less than two weeks after the U.S. withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo launched Washington's "New Iran Strategy" before an audience at the Heritage Foundation. In his remarks, he insisted that Iranian women's long struggle for inclusion and equality matters dearly to Washington. As if to prove the point, the U.S. State Department's social media feeds since that day have interspersed announcements of new choking sanctions with twinkling reminders of Iranian women's potential ("Congratulations to Iranian-American and new #NASA Astronaut Jasmin Moghbeli!"). In January 2020, the State Department released a two-minute video on the history of Iranian women's rights. To a melody of maudlin piano and soaring strings, the video sweeps viewers past scenes of bare-headed women in silk blouses, wistfully recalling an era when Iran's women purportedly "enjoyed freedom and equal opportunity", before shifting to dark footage from after the 1979 revolution, when "women's rights in #Iran...regressed". No Iranian woman from either era actually speaks in the video, about either the Shah's regime or the Islamic Republic. But the final caption promises nevertheless: "The women of the U.S. will stand with the women of Iran".

Washington's evocation of Iranian women and their aspirations has become a feature of its marketing for "maximum pressure" – the campaign of economic coercion aimed at precipitating Iranian capitulation to U.S. demands or regime collapse. The marketing is stunning for its hypocrisy, focused as it is on the plight of Iranian women even as it says nothing about the injustices women face at the hands of Middle Eastern governments allied with the U.S. Moreover, as Washington has widened its claim that the Islamic Republic disallows any space for women, it has grown more detached from reality. One tweet this past December maintained that the Iranian regime denies women the opportunity to "participate in public life" – during a month when Iranian female directors and actors were shining at the Tehran film festival. Women have long been engaged in almost every aspect of Iranian public life from politics to political activism and from diplomacy to flying planes and driving heavy trucks. But perhaps the most regrettable feature of this U.S. policy spotlighting the suppression of Iranian women's rights is that it has damaged the activism and independence of the very women it claims to support.

Of course, and despite women's prominence in public life, the Islamic Republic has a long and dismal record of keeping Iranian women second-class citizens in terms of civil and personal rights. The surge of women into higher education and the work force that accompanied the 1979 revolution galvanised women to demand more legal and social

equality, not less. Yet the state has, for decades, defended a status quo of discriminatory laws like mandatory hijab. It was only in December 2019, under international pressure, that Iran's Football Federation committed to allowing women to attend matches in the domestic club league. Restrictions on women's public conduct and appearance have sown increasing resentment and alienation, especially among millennial women and girls, who are less inclined than their elders to view the relaxation of rules as sufficient progress. As one 19-year-old sports champion put it: "My generation wants [dress codes] removed. We compare ourselves to the rest of the world, where everyone is modernising and evolving, and we find this strictness ridiculous".

For much of the past two decades, the Iranian women's movement has encompassed diverse strands of activism: there have been radical and gradualist wings, single-issue campaigns seeking an end to mandatory hijab or access to sports stadiums, drives to reform divorce and domestic violence laws, and grassroots efforts aimed at mobilising rural and working-class women behind such legal changes. On occasion, these different currents have brought their particular struggles into the streets and endured crackdowns, before shifting course. The authorities have never smiled upon women's activism, and every subset of the women's movement, from state-affiliated religious feminists to secular-minded organisers, has encountered some level of official hostility and obstruction. The authorities' intolerance for women's organising has grown so severe in recent years that most of the movement's luminaries are now in prison, in exile abroad or in a self-imposed state of quiescence. But the state's response has not been limited to repression. At times, it has grudgingly tolerated – and even conceded to – women's demands as a reality with powerful electoral implications. Women's turnout has been critical to presidential wins by more moderate candidates since the late 1990s, and politicians now regularly emphasise women's concerns when courting voters.

The Trump administration is trying to appropriate the Iranian women's cause. Whether they are skirmishing with authorities in anti-hijab street confrontations, joining labour protests, such as last year's May Day demonstrations, or agitating against the government's November hike in fuel prices, women have been active in airing specific grievances. Most demonstrators have pointedly demanded an end to hijab laws, but they have received loud support – whether solicited or not – from anti-regime voices in Washington and among certain Iranian opposition figures outside the country, whose objective is toppling the regime. If this external pressure was supposed to help, there is little evidence that it achieved its goal. Iran's security apparatus, under siege and suspicious of citizens' real or imagined links with the outside world, has over the past year doled out some of the severest sentences for women activists in recent memory.

In the 2000s and 2010s, Iranian women waged sophisticated and far-ranging battles against both discriminatory laws and the patriarchal culture, shared by men and women alike, from which those laws partly emanate. But in recent months, all those intense and public rows among women, between generations of activists with varying priorities, over whether the most suitable terrain was the family living room, one's personal relationship or the public street corner, have fallen eerily silent. Internal debate among women activists in Iran now is largely about the frightening, pervasive threats to the country's security and well-being.

A sanctions campaign as broad and blunt as that which the U.S. has built up is bound to have inadvertent consequences for the target population. As the economy reels from sanctions, women entrepreneurs, particularly those in cash-based or service industries, have been particularly hard-hit. The 2010s saw a flourishing of women-owned businesses, with successes piling up in sectors women found themselves able to enter – from online clothing sales to cafés and restaurants. Those sectors might have appealed to women because they could better control their hours and workload, sidestep

workplace exploitation or harassment, or discover opportunities for real economic advancement.

But as the Iranian currency began to sink in value in the summer of 2018, first in response to the Trump administration withdrawing from the nuclear deal, and then more precipitously, in anticipation of increasingly severe sanctions, sometimes falling by double digits in a single day, families coped by cutting back on leisure spending, on everything from clothes to hair salons to eating out. Small shops and retailers saw their revenue drop, while their rents skyrocketed. "Many women I know, often younger women who used to be activists or journalists and had turned to running cafés, are now going out of business", said Sussan Tahmasebi, a long-time civil society activist who retains close ties with women counterparts in Iran. "They're not just losing economically, but losing that liberating force of being able to be financially independent".

Sanctions have also forced tens of foreign firms to close shop and lay off Iranian workers. These companies tended to offer forward-thinking and empowering workspaces for women, setting high standards – everything from attractive salaries to more professional management and expected conduct – that Iranian companies would have to match. Some organised anti-sexual harassment training for employees, to bring them in line with minimal codes of conduct in European firms. Sanctions halted that progress.

The record thus appears clear: by imposing stifling sanctions, the Trump administration has deprived Iranian women of economic empowerment and the social independence that can accompany it; by politicising the women's movement in the service of its own goals, it has exposed them to graver danger; and by zeroing in on women's rights in Iran while it ignores them elsewhere in the Middle East, it has highlighted its own insincerity. The monumental challenges that Iranian women face in fighting their government's discriminatory laws and repressive policies are difficult enough without the debilitating impact of sanctions. If they could collectively send a message to Washington, they might draw from the words of the thirteenth-century Persian poet, Sa'adi, who said: "I do not expect any favours from you. Just do no harm".

IRAN: Iran's sole female Olympic medalist says she's defected

By Vasco Cotovio

CNN (12.01.2020) - <https://cnn.it/2Re9pVt> - Iran's sole female Olympic medalist, Kimia Alizadeh, has announced that she's permanently left her country for Europe.

"Let me start with a greeting, a farewell or condolences," the 21-year-old wrote in an Instagram post explaining why she was defecting. "I am one of the millions of oppressed women in Iran who they have been playing with for years."

Alizadeh became the first Iranian woman to win an Olympic medal after claiming bronze in the 57kg category of Taekwondo at the 2016 Rio Olympics.

Affectionately known in Iran as "The Tsunami," Alizadeh announced she was leaving her birth country amid searing criticism of the regime in Tehran.

"They took me wherever they wanted. I wore whatever they said. Every sentence they ordered me to say, I repeated. Whenever they saw fit, they exploited me," she wrote, adding that credit for her success always went to those in charge.

"I wasn't important to them. None of us mattered to them, we were tools," Alizadeh added, explaining that while the regime celebrated her medals, it criticized the sport she had chosen: "The virtue of a woman is not to stretch her legs!"

Reports of her defection first surfaced Thursday, with some Iranians suggesting she had left for the Netherlands. It was unclear from her post what country Alizadeh had gone to.

On Friday the head of Iran's Taekwondo Federation, Seyed Mohammad Pouladgar, claimed Alizadeh had assured both her father and her coach that she was traveling as part of her vacation, a trip he claimed was paid for by the Iranian government. He dismissed the reports of Alizadeh's defection as politically motivated rumors amplified by the foreign media.

Alizadeh confirmed the rumors Saturday, saying she "didn't want to sit at the table of hypocrisy, lies, injustice and flattery" and that she did not want to be complicit with the regime's "corruption and lies."

"My troubled spirit does not fit with your dirty economic ties and tight political lobbies. I wish for nothing else than for Taekwondo, safety and for a happy and healthy life, she said adding that she was not invited to go to Europe.

She said the decision was harder than winning Olympic gold. "I remain a daughter of Iran wherever I am," she said.

Her defection came amid anti-government protests in cities across Iran Saturday and international pressure after Iran admitted it had accidentally shot down a Ukrainian passenger airliner, killing all 176 people aboard.

Canada, Sweden and other countries whose citizens died on the plane have increased demands on Tehran to deliver a complete and transparent investigation against the backdrop of fresh US sanctions on Iran and a dangerous escalation with Washington.

"Iran will continue to lose more strong women unless it learns to empower and support them," said US State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus about Alizadeh's defection.

IRELAND: Ireland must prioritise female healthcare, urges women's council

Group seeks free contraception, universal pension system and support for lone parents.

By Shauna Bowers

The Irish Times (20.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/369TcWN> - Ireland has had a "litany of historic health scandals" affecting women and female healthcare must now be prioritised, the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCi) has said.

In its "feminist Ireland manifesto", published on Tuesday, the NWCi called on general election candidates to show their commitment to gender equality by signing up to 10 key issues, relating to women's health, domestic violence and accommodation.

Among the feminist lobby group's demands were calls for free universal contraception, support for lone parents, establishment of domestic homicide reviews and the introduction of a universal pension system.

Orla O'Connor, director of NWCI, said the election has the potential to "set the political agenda for the next five years" and will be "crucial" in deciding the future direction of the country.

"We have seen from recent controversies such as CervicalCheck that women's health must be given consistent focus and dedicated resources," Ms O'Connor said. "We have to put a sustained focus on women's health, on the gaps that exist in services and in driving the change that women have been so active in calling for publicly."

Delivery of SláinteCare

"We're calling on candidates to commit to the delivery of SláinteCare, to develop women-centred mental health services, to introduce universal, free contraception and to ensure access to the full range of abortion services across the country."

The NWCI also raised the issue of domestic violence and called for an increase in the number of domestic abuse refuge spaces available across the State.

"One in four women in Ireland experience physical and sexual violence," Ms O'Connor added. "After Ireland finally ratified the Istanbul Convention on violence against women in 2019, we need candidates who will prioritise its full implementation, including strengthening legislation and investing in frontline services, and ensuring Ireland has enough refuge places."

Ms O'Connor said Ireland has "the highest childcare costs in Europe, one of the highest rates of women's homelessness in Europe, and only one third our recommended refuge spaces for women fleeing violence", adding that it is "critical" that the incoming government tackle gender equality.

The 10 issues in NWCI's feminist Ireland manifesto

- End the housing and homelessness crisis
- Prioritise women's health
- Deliver a public childcare service
- Change Ireland's record on violence against women
- Ensure safe, legal and local access to abortion
- Eliminate poverty
- End the gender pay gap and deliver decent work for women
- Advance women's leadership
- Lead a green new deal
- Guarantee access to justice

ISRAEL: Israeli schoolgirls in 'shorts rebellion' against sexist dress code

Israeli girls are protesting over instructions banning female students from coming to school wearing shorts.

By Rina Bassist

Al-Monitor (22.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3qp0kon> - Israeli girls have been going to school this week wearing shorts, protesting several incidents where female students in shorts were banned from entering school premises. The protest spread also on social media, with numerous Facebook pages dedicated to the protest.

On May 17, the government reopened high schools, after weeks of closure over the coronavirus outbreak. The reopening coincided with one of the harshest heatwaves the country has ever known. Temperatures in central Israel reached 104 degrees Fahrenheit and more in some places. The Israel Meteorological Service issued May 16 a heatwave warning for the entire week, stating that high temperatures would affect the country during both day and night. A few bushfires broke out in the north of the country. And though many education institutions in Israel are equipped with air conditioners, schools were instructed to advise students to stay in the shade and drink lots of water.

Still, despite the sweltering heatwave, several girls at a school in the Tel Aviv suburb of Ra'anana were sent home for wearing shorts.

The decision to send the girls home sparked anger among students and parents, with female students claiming that boys can come to school in shorts. For them, this was a clear case of gender discrimination and even of religious principles imposed on the secular school system.

The rising anger encouraged many other girls to come to school wearing shorts, and groups of girls in shorts posted group photos on social media networks. On May 19, dozens of schoolgirls from the Hefer Valley Regional Council arrived to school wearing shorts in protest. The school management banned them from entering the campus. But by May 20, these short-wearing initiatives turned into a wave of protests that swept across the country, with shorts-sporting girls in high schools and middle schools demanding equality in dress code, especially during heatwaves. Girls in Kfar Saba, Modi'in, Lod and many other towns were wearing shorts to school.

The short rebellion was aggravated by another incident that occurred May 18, involving a 7-year-old girl in a school in Petah Tikva in central Israel. The second-grader arrived at school in a sleeveless dress. Shortly after her entering her class, a teacher demanded that she change her attire and gave her a T-shirt, but no pants. The frightened girl took off her dress staying in her underwear for the entire school day.

Labor Knesset member Merav Michaeli, known for her longstanding battle for gender equality causes, posted a video clip on her Twitter account, encouraging the protests of the girls: "Today I want to applaud all of these courageous girls who dared coming to school with their legs [showing]. Yes. This was a courageous act. ... They stood together and insisted on their basic right to come to school with their legs [showing]. Boys also came with their legs [showing], but this was quite OK for the female teachers and headmasters who chose to punish just the girls."

ITALY: Italy's 'boys' club' politics shuts women out of coronavirus debate

POLITICO asks six women from across sectors what they would do differently.

By Greta Privitera

Politico (18.05.2020) - <https://politi.co/3cZBDwG> - Women are overwhelmingly on the frontlines of the coronavirus pandemic. And yet, in Italy, when it comes to engineering an exit from lockdown, they've had a hard time getting heard.

Women make up two-thirds of Italy's health workers, 80 percent of cashiers in supermarkets, 90 percent of home care workers and nearly 82 percent of teachers. But very few have a seat at the table where key decisions are being made about the policies to navigate the country's reopening.

Italy is still in the hands of a "boys' club," Emma Bonino, one of 16 senators who filed a motion calling for the government to increase female representation in its working groups, told POLITICO. "Men pass power from hand to hand in a closed circle."

Following a month of protests and public outcry — including the social media campaign "Dateci Voce" (Give us voice) — Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte appeared to take the criticism to heart and pushed for more women to be appointed to the expert groups advising the government.

Five new women will join the Vittorio Colao task force charged with designing Italy's roadmap out of the crisis. The previously all-male scientific committee managing the emergency response will see six female experts join its ranks.

Is it too little, too late? As Italy comes out from under lockdown, POLITICO asked women from across sectors what they would do differently if they were involved in designing the government's deconfinement strategy.

* * *

Orna Serio, middle school teacher, Milan

Before February 23, Orna Serio had never heard of Zoom. When Italy's schools closed, she had to reinvent how she did her job — one she's done for 30 years.

To her, a major blind spot of the current recovery plan is the uncertainty surrounding kids' futures. Despite teachers' best efforts, their education has been seriously interrupted.

Serio, who is a mother of three, knows how difficult it can be to keep up with kids' school work. She sees the effort that her students' families are putting in from behind the screen, but worries that it's not a long-term solution.

Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are at particular risk of getting lost in the system, according to Serio, and the government should be looking at how to get them the proper tools.

"It takes even more funding to provide families in need with computers and tablets to follow lessons online," she said. "Despite initial aid, many students have been left out."

The government also needs to more clearly understand the link between the reopening of schools for kids and the ability of their parents to get back to work, according to Serio.

Italy's education minister has suggested schools could reopen again in September, with a mix of in-person classes and online learning. But the lack of clarity on what the new arrangement will look like has left many parents wondering how they will go back to work if their kids aren't in school all day.

In many families, deprived by the coronavirus of being able to rely on grandparents, the burden of child care will fall to women, who are still most often the primary caregivers in Italy, exacerbating existing inequalities.

"I understand the difficulties of having to manage a historical moment like this, but it seems like we are being driven with one eye shut, with no long-term project in sight," Serio said. "At some point you have to choose a path."

Giovanna Iannantuoni, dean of Università Bicocca, Milan

Giovanna Iannantuoni, one of only five female university deans in Italy, knows exactly what she would have said, had she been asked to contribute to the debate.

"I would have recommended using the university laboratories to do mass swab testing and make serological kits for the population, because testing is essential," she said. "Our laboratories were never called on."

Now that tests are more widely available, Università Bicocca is the first university in Italy to test all of its employees — more than 2,000 people.

"I went out of my way to start 'Phase Two' by making those who work with me safe," said Iannantuoni. "A woman's approach? Well, I'm proud of it. It's a way of taking care of our community and [protecting] others from unnecessary risks."

Excluding women from discussions on how to move the country out of lockdown — and what life will look like on the other side — makes no sense, said Iannantuoni, who said she hopes politicians will put the well-being of citizens at the center of the debate.

"Starting at my university, I would like to build workplaces with flexible policies, capable of reconciling working life with private life," she said.

"We need to rethink the social model in which we live," she added. "It takes courage to unhinge cultural assumptions, and courage is often a woman's virtue."

Emanuela Girardi, founder of the nonprofit Pop AI, Turin

Emanuela Girardi became one of the main promoters of the "Dateci Voce" initiative when she realized the government would not notice the absence of women's perspectives unless it was confronted with its own biases.

"It all started in a chat with some girlfriends," said Girardi, an artificial intelligence expert who is also a mother of three. "After the announcement of the task force dedicated to rethinking the future of Italy, for the umpteenth time in this emergency it was clear to us that our politicians do not consider women."

A major issue that has been ignored, she said, is the fact that Italy has one of the lowest rates of female employment in Europe — 50 percent. That means that, under the government's new measures, 72 percent of the approximately 4 million people returning to work in this next phase of lockdown are men.

"They can go back to work because at home they have a wife, a partner, that takes care of the children," said Girardi.

Italy needs to be making it possible for women to work outside the home, she said. Those in power have to understand that "gender equality makes sense, it increases the GDP of the country and contributes to the development of the economy."

To advance that goal, the government should also introduce legislation to ensure gender balance in institutions and expert groups that design legislation, said Girardi, who is a member of the ministry of economic development's expert group on artificial intelligence.

Although she has "always been against 'pink quotas,'" Girardi said she now thinks they may be the only way to make tangible progress in a "male system" and make sure women are heard.

Paola Pedrini, general practitioner, Bergamo

Although Paola Pedrini represents family doctors in the region of Lombardy — the most severely affected by the outbreak — the government didn't seem particularly interested in her insight on the situation, she said.

"Nobody ever called me from the government to ask me for information, only the mayor of Milan, Beppe Sala, did once," said Pedrini, the Italian Federation of General Practitioners' sole female regional director among 19 men.

She said she would have pushed the issue of lacking personal protective equipment in hospitals, advised against clogging emergency rooms and emphasized the need for more "at home" diagnostic tools. Having a team of people equipped to carry out tests outside hospitals and advise people on self-isolating would undoubtedly have saved lives, she added.

Instead of listening to doctors, the government "listened to the entrepreneurs," who resisted turning cities like Bergamo into "red zones," she said.

If she was involved in current discussions, she would advise against moving into the next phase of lockdown at all.

"We are not able to immediately isolate a suspected case and that person's close contacts, because testing is only done at the hospital," she said. "General practitioners also still lack protective equipment, which as of now is still being procured by donations."

Pedrini also said she wished the government understood the importance of giving people clear information.

When the number of hospital cases appeared to have decreased, the government called it good news, ignoring the fact that the numbers had fallen because hospitals were full and they no longer took in patients — meaning COVID-19 sufferers were left at home, sometimes in critical condition.

"Even now, the situation that is communicated is not realistic. Those who have mild symptoms and stay at home are not calculated in the numbers, so we do not yet have a reliable figure," she cautioned. "I would have advised that letting people know how things really are was important to earn people's trust."

Stefania, cashier, Milan

Since the emergency began, Stefania, who works at the checkout of a supermarket in Milan, has hardly taken off her blue uniform.

"It's better now, but in the beginning it was hell," she said. "We were without masks or visors. People were storming supermarkets, and no one sanitized the spaces."

She wants the government to pay greater attention to essential workers like her and her husband, who also works in a supermarket. Essential workers, she said, should be given the right protective equipment and be systematically tested if they're expected to keep working while others self-isolate.

The government's failure to do so puts people like Stefania "in a risky position, both for ourselves and our families," she said.

Stefania, who asked to remain anonymous because she is afraid of losing her job, also stressed the need for more support for families like hers who are struggling to find child care solutions while they work.

The government's "babysitter bonus" — a monthly €600 check given to each family — is helpful, but not nearly enough, she said. On days when she and her husband had to work long shifts, they had to pay a neighbor to look after their 7-year-old son for 12 hours.

She also wishes she could spend more time with her son, and help him with his homework, without sacrificing the income they need. "I feel guilty, but we need the €1,000 I earn a month, otherwise we would not be able to pay the rent, the expenses, and everything else."

Her family is only getting by thanks to the help of the people around her, she said. "I, as a woman and a mother, feel abandoned by the state."

Laura Boldrini, senator, Rome

For Laura Boldrini, the epidemic has highlighted an unbearable situation: Fifty-one percent of the population is still excluded from the political debate.

In the midst of an epidemic, that means that discussions over how to handle the emergency and what comes next are inevitably skewed according to what men consider important, making these plans less effective than they could be.

Boldrini, who is one of the senators to have called for more female involvement in lockdown discussions, is tired of hearing stories of women who have been forced to give up their jobs or whose partners don't help with child care, she said.

She is worried that failing to address the specific challenges women are facing during the pandemic will exacerbate current inequalities. "We must stem the damage so it does not become an accepted construct," she said.

She wants politicians involved in the current discussions to consider this an opportunity to build "a more contemporary and just society" — one where child care can be shared equally between women and men and families are supported by generous welfare programs that free both parents up to work.

"These are structural changes that start from politics," she said. With only men at the top, though, there's a real possibility that the government's new measures set society back, she added. "We cannot miss this opportunity."

JORDAN: Custody laws maintain a sexist status quo

Despite important strides made by social movements advocating for women's rights and led by Arab women in the region, there is still a long way to go to combat gender discrimination.

By [Lara Bellone d'Altavilla](#)

Open Global Rights (29.09.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3NTfio1> - It is no secret that national penal codes throughout Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA) countries include discriminatory laws against women in the areas of marriage, divorce, and child custody. Sharia law is used to justify these familial laws throughout the SWANA region, but modern interpretations of Sharia differ from what is actually written in the Quran.

Perhaps one of the most damaging aspects of familial law for women relates to child custody, where mothers find themselves at the mercy of fathers and all-male courts. Although social movements advocating for women's rights and led by Arab women in the region have been essential, with important strides made throughout the years, more significant legal amendments must be made to personal status laws to address ongoing problems.

Jordan is a prime example. There, familial laws have been a detriment to mothers seeking custody of their children. Under the [Personal Status Law](#), fathers are given wilaya, which refers to legal authority over the child, while mothers are given hadhana, which refers to physical care of the child. However, hadhana can be taken from a mother if she is found to be 'unfit' or remarries. [Article 223](#) of the Personal Status Law gives the wilaya to the child's father. The automatic grant of the wilaya to the child's father does not change, even if the father acts in violation of the child's best interests.

Under this law, Jordanian (and [foreign](#)) mothers are [granted custody of their children until the age of 15](#), but fathers possess the right to determine their children's education, country of residence, medical treatment, and religious upbringing. The father is also responsible for [obtaining passports and permitting international travel](#), unless the mother secures the court's approval to do so in a very long and tedious process.

Farah Shahin (pseudonym), a women's rights activist and single mother, has lived through this experience. She has been fighting for legal custody of her child for the last three years after divorcing her ex-husband. I was able to connect with Farah through social media after following her activism work, which is particularly crucial given there are few Jordanian women publicly advocating for amendments to the country's custody laws. Before her marriage, Farah and her supportive family were not aware of the disproportionate effect that custody laws had on women.

It wasn't until she filed for divorce that she learned of the ways the law works against her, including that it doesn't permit her to apply for her daughter's legal registration documents or make any life decisions for her. Since then, Farah has become an activist, speaking out for women's rights and against discriminatory custody laws. She has, however, faced heavy backlash and criticism from local communities, including from Jordanian women.

Farah further explains that even after being granted a divorce, mothers can still lose custody of their children if the father decides to exaggerate claims of their alleged 'misconduct' under interpreted Islamic pretexts, including allegations about friendships with men, immodest dress, or inappropriate upbringing of their child. When women do not comply with the father's requests or attend meeting times for specific reasons, they could face jail time under the current law.

Given such harassment, divorce and custody battles have discouraged women from seeking divorce out of fear of losing access to their children. This is particularly harmful for women suffering from domestic violence and abuse by their husbands, thereby demonstrating how divorce and custody laws are another example of discriminatory treatment against women.

Further, according to Farah, when a mother loses custody of her child, many times the child will face abuse upon returning to the father or his family. Farah shares, "the familial laws are not only detrimental towards women but also for their children who are subjected to domestic abuse. It only shows that the courts don't actually care about children, but rather care about keeping the status quo for men."

Farah stresses the importance of women's financial independence, needed to battle for child custody in courts and provide a good life for their children. However, this is extremely difficult since only [15 percent of Jordanian women are in the workforce](#).

And after getting divorced, women are not allowed to remarry for risk of losing custody of the child under [Article 171/B](#). Yet, Jordanian law, along with that of other countries in the region, does not impose the same restrictions on men. This makes dating for divorced mothers extremely challenging, since most women do not want to remarry for fear of losing their child. Courts "prohibit us from having a sexual life because we will be seen as 'unfit' mothers, but at the same time they prohibit us from remarrying," Farah states.

All of this takes a psychological toll on mothers, which can be used against them. Dismally, Farah notes that, "custody battles and divorce ruin the mentalities of women here. When you get divorced, the men make women's lives miserable, but I still blame the law because it encourages men to do this. What people don't realize is that laws have direct consequences on society. Therefore, when sexist laws exist in a country, sexism will be prevalent within that society."

Familial laws have disproportionate negative impacts on women in SWANA countries but also negatively impact women in other parts of the world. Arab women are demanding more from their governments and working hard to raise awareness in their communities, but legal amendments in familial law are needed to change societal norms and the mindsets of future generations, especially in regards to women's rights and liberties.

KENYA: Kenya High Court suspends move to dissolve parliament over lack of women

By Nita Bhalla

Thomson Reuters Foundation (25.09.2020) - <https://reut.rs/2GjQYg9> - Kenya's High Court on Thursday suspended any move to dissolve parliament after the country's top judge said it was necessary as neither of the legislative houses had enough women lawmakers.

Chief Justice David Maraga on Monday advised President Uhuru Kenyatta to dissolve parliament, saying lawmakers had failed to meet a 2010 constitutional provision which allows for one third of seats to be occupied by women.

The chief justice's move upset many male parliamentarians, including the speaker of the house, who said it was unlawful, ill-advised and premature and would plunge the East African nation into a constitutional crisis.

Under Kenyan law, once parliament is dissolved, elections must take place within 90 days.

In response to a petition challenging Maraga's advisory, the High Court suspended any move to dissolve parliament pending a full hearing on the case.

"I have carefully considered the petition and find that it raises substantial questions of law," wrote High Court Justice Weldon Korir in his judgment, ordering a hearing.

Women hold 22% of seats in the country's lower house of parliament, and 31% in the upper house. Kenya's 2010 constitution states no more than two-thirds of any elected or appointed body can be of the same gender.

Court rulings in Kenya have directed parliament to pass legislation to enforce the rule or risk being dissolved, but previous attempts have failed with female MPs accusing male lawmakers of deliberately blocking efforts.

In the advisory to Kenyatta, Maraga said the failure to enact the legislation was clear testimony of lawmakers' "lackadaisical attitude and conduct" in relation to the two-thirds gender rule.

A panel of appointed judges will hear the petition on Oct. 7.

KENYA: For love or land – the debate about Kenyan women's rights to matrimonial property

Kenya's Matrimonial Property Act, which is discriminatory towards women and inconsistent with the country's constitution, means few married women own land. Less than five percent of all land title deeds in Kenya are held jointly by women and only one percent of land titles are held by women alone.

By Miriam Gathigah

Inter Press Service (01.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2Yh2E8O> - Ida Njeri was a civil servant with access to a Savings and Credit Cooperative Society (SACCO) through her employer, and her husband a private consultant in the information and communication sector, when she began taking low-interest loans from the cooperative so they could buy up land in Ruiru, Central Kenya. She'd willing done it. Part of their long-term plan together for having a family was that they would acquire land and eventually build their dream home. But little did Njeri realise that 12 years and three children later the law would stand against her right to owning the matrimonial property.

"As a private consultant, it was difficult for my husband to join a SACCO. People generally join SACCOs through their employer. This makes it easy to save and take loans because you need three people within your SACCO to guarantee the loan," Njeri tells IPS.

"My husband had a savings bank account so we would combine my loans with his savings. By 2016, I had 45,000 dollars in loans. My husband would tell me the amount of money needed to purchase land and I would take out a loan," she adds, explaining that her husband handled all the purchases.

By 2016 the couple had purchased 14 different pieces of land, each measuring an eighth of an acre. But last year, when the marriage fell apart, Njeri discovered that all their joint land was in her husband's name.

"All along I just assumed that the land was in both our names. I never really thought about it because we were jointly building our family. Even worse, all land payment receipts and sale agreements are also in his name alone," she says.

Worse still, there was little she can do about it within the current framework of the country's laws.

Despite Article 45 (3) of the 2010 Constitution providing for equality during marriage and upon divorce, and despite the fact that Njeri's marriage was registered (effectively granting her a legal basis for land ownership under the Marriage Act 2014) there is another law in the country — the Matrimonial Property Act 2013 — which stands against her.

More specifically, it is Section 7 of the act that states ownership of matrimonial property is dependent on the contributions of each spouse toward its acquisition.

- "Ownership of matrimonial property rests in the spouses according to the contribution of either spouses towards its acquisition, and shall be divided between the spouses if they divorce or their marriage is otherwise dissolved," Section 7 states.

Because Njeri had no proof of jointly purchasing the land, upon her divorce she is not entitled to it.

Hers is not an isolated case of married women struggling to ensure their land rights.

In 2018, the Kenya Land Alliance (KLA), an advocacy network dedicated to the realisation of constitutional provisions of women's land rights as a means to eradicate poverty and hunger, and promote gender equality, in line with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), released an audit of land ownership after the disaggregation and analysis of approximately one third of the 3.2 million title deeds issued by the government between 2013 and 2017 — the highest number of title deeds issued in any regime.

Odenda Lumumba is a land rights activist and founder of KLA, which is a local partner for Deliver For Good, a global campaign that applies a gender lens to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and powered by global advocacy organisation Women Deliver. She explains that the data on land ownership is a pointer to the reality that gender disparities remain a concern, especially because of the intricate relationship between land tenure systems, livelihoods and poverty.

"There is very little progress towards women owning land. There are so many obstacles for them to overcome," Lumumba tells IPS.

- The KLA audit of land ownership found that only 103,043 titles or 10.3 percent of title deeds were issued to women compared to the 865,095 or 86.5 percent that went to men.
- Even greater gender disparities were found in terms of the actual land size. While men own 9,903,304 hectares in titled land, representing 97.76 percent of land, women own 1.67 percent or 10,129,704 hectares of land during this five year period.

- Further, this audit found that men own 75 percent of land title deeds of all allocated land settlement schemes.

In 2018, the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) in Kenya petitioned Kenya's High Court, arguing that Section 7 of the Matrimonial Property Act was discriminatory towards women and inconsistent and in contravention of Article 45 (3) of the Constitution.

The court dismissed the petition, ruling out a blanket equal sharing of marital property as it would "open the door for a party to get into marriage and walk out of it in the event of divorce with more than they deserve".

Within this context, less than five percent of all land title deeds in Kenya are held jointly by women and only one percent of land titles are held by women alone who are in turn disadvantaged in the manner in which they use, own, manage and dispose land, says FIDA-Kenya.

But as gender experts are becoming alarmed by the rising numbers of female headed households — 32 percent out of 11 million households based on government estimates — securing women's land rights is becoming more urgent.

"The Matrimonial Property Act gives women the capacity to register their property but a majority of women do not realise just how important this is. Later, they struggle to access their property because they did not ensure that they were registered as owners," Janet Anyango, legal counsel at FIDA-Kenya's Access to Justice Programme, tells IPS. FIDA-Kenya is a premier women rights organisation that, for 34 years, has offered free legal aid to at least three million women and children. It is also another Deliver For Good/Women Deliver partner organisation in Kenya.

Anyango says that in law "the meaning of 'contribution' was expanded to include non-monetary contributions but it is difficult to quantify contribution in the absence of tangible proof. In the 2016 lawsuit, we took issue with the fact that the law attributes marital liabilities equally but not assets".

- In 2016 FIDA-Kenya sued the office of the Attorney General with regards to act, stating the same issues of discrimination against women.

In addition to the Matrimonial Property Act, laws such as the Law of Succession Act seek to cushion both surviving male and female spouses but are still skewed in favour of men as widows lose their "lifetime interest" in property if the remarry. And where there is no surviving spouse or children, the deceased's father is given priority over the mother.

Women Deliver recognises that globally women and girls have unequal access to land tenure and land rights, creating a negative ripple effect on development and economic progress for all.

"When women have secure land rights, their earnings can increase significantly, improving their abilities to open bank accounts, save money, build credit, and make investments in themselves, their families and communities," Susan Papp, Managing Director of Policy and Advocacy at Women Deliver, tells IPS.

She says that applying a gender lens to access "to resources is crucial to powering progress for and with all during the COVID-19 pandemic, even as the world continues to work towards the SDGs".

And even though marriage services at the Attorney General's office have been suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as have all services at the land registries, women like Njeri will continue to fight for what they rightfully own.

LIBYA: Libya's forgotten half: between conflict and pandemic, women pay the higher price

Now more than ever, the country needs everyone's contribution to survive the upcoming changes.

By Asma Khalifa

openDemocracy (14.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3g6bm1E> - Immediately after the state of emergency was declared in Libya, the government in Tripoli began dispensing funds intended to combat the pandemic. Half of it tangled in corrupt deals and used to silence the public's worries as the population knows well enough that if a health crisis hits them, they would have nowhere to go.

Libyans have been traveling to Tunisia for medical treatment long before 2011. While the virus now prevents travel due to closed borders, travel restrictions for women existed long before the pandemic arrived. Due to the breakdown in the security apparatus, the restriction on movement prevents women from freely driving on their own between towns to access services, including health. The security situation of roads is often precarious, not only armed conflicts could erupt at any point, the roads are also littered with fake check points where citizens are highjacked or kidnapped for ransom.

Women stuck between conflict and health

The situation in the west has worsened due to the ongoing war, with hospitals, health facilities and medical personnel readily targeted. On 7 April, Libyan Arab Armed Forces' (LAAF) heavy shelling hit Al Khadra Hospital maternity ward, injuring a health worker and damaging the hospital's facilities. Al Khadra hospital was one of the potential COVID-19 assigned health facilities. Royal hospital in Tareeq Al-Shouq, south of Tripoli was destroyed in late April. Hospitals also lack equipment, water and beds to host a potential influx of patients. This puts medical staff at risk of infection with women making up the majority of the nursing staff.

At the Al Jalaa paediatric hospital, a suspected COVID-19 patient was received by a female doctor who later had to quarantine herself. Such situations can lead to the stigmatisation of health workers. This can particularly affect women, leading to dire social consequences in a society that uses reputational damage to control women far more than men, which may lead to women withdrawing from the sector altogether.

Given the political division along geographical lines in the country, each side has developed its own response mechanism to the pandemic. The authorities in the east aimed to control and silence any dissident voices that are remotely critical of the conditions of the health care system. In Tripoli, the government pre-occupied with the fighting in the south of the capital, took on preventive measures and imposed strict curfew hours, fining those who break it. This has further empowered the security forces that already operated with impunity in the capital.

While the curfew could indeed contribute to flattening the curve, it remains oblivious to the humanitarian impact on families already struggling due to a decade of conflict. But this has had greater impact on women. Women who are most vulnerable, including the

internally displaced, women with low income, or women who live in remote locations and are sole providers are in a dire situation financially and logistically. Many of them do not have the luxury to stop working as they need access to their daily income, and the freedom to access public transportation. These vulnerabilities facing women have not been assessed nor considered in government policy, neither when it comes to allocation of resources, nor in lockdown measures.

Government is not gender inclusive

When the COVID-19 crisis committee announced some of its plans, it was immediately clear that there was no consideration for the gendered implications of the pandemic on women. In response, fourteen local organisations that work on women's rights co-signed an open letter to the presidential council to urge them to include their gender sensitive recommendations in their action plan to address COVID-19.

No response or action was taken towards this letter. There has been no humanitarian assistance or compensation provided for the female internally displaced or an assessment for those at risk of losing their livelihoods because of the pandemic. Add to that the lack of any consideration to address the rise in gender-based violence. In fact, within the first weeks of the lock down, three women were reported murdered by their partners across the country. There are no official mechanisms to report domestic violence, a taboo topic that is not widely discussed in Libya. Women who are at risk at home have nowhere to turn and now even less resources to seek help elsewhere.

On the other hand, the presidential council proceeded to reduce salaries (excluding their own of course) as part of austerity measures due to the oil blockade and the lock down. According to Hala Bugaighis, women working in the so-called pink-collar jobs, are paid less than men and are more likely to lose their jobs since men's labour is more valued in the workforce. This may significantly impact the migrant community in Libya, especially female migrants and refugees who are likely to be most severely affected.

Women taking measures in their own hands

Despite the significant shrinking of civil society space since 2014, non-governmental organizations are unrelenting in their service delivery, often in partnership with municipalities. Civil society organizations often lack the resources to implement their own responses, however many have begun voluntary independent initiatives. There are now multiple online campaigns such as Quarantine and Don't overburden yourself to raise awareness on COVID-19 and its gendered impact, flagging the rising incidents of domestic violence and providing legal consultations to the survivors and assisting women who are in need.

Women who run small businesses have been impacted negatively by the pandemic. However, some women who run sewing workshops and fashion houses have proven inspirational in their local communities by manufacturing medical equipment needed for the hospitals. Another example is the work carried out by Lybotics who printed 3D medical masks. Libyan civil society has remained flexible, with very little heed from the state.

Government policies tend to ignore civil society despite their direct contact with the communities in need, and therefore are able to assess potential risks and mitigation measures better. Due to the very gendered nature of the Libyan conflict, women are particularly missing from the picture since they are not fighting and are not represented in the government. Due to lack of communication channels between the decision makers and CSOs, their work is largely missing from policies. The government should establish regular communication channels to consult CSOs and particularly women.

The pandemic's implications are very tangible, warring factions and their foreign backers must stop all hostilities not only to come up with a solution to the conflict but also to face the immense economic and social challenges COVID-19 poses on Libya. Now more than ever, the country needs everyone's contribution to survive the upcoming changes.

MEXICO: Mexican diplomacy has gone feminist

Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration has boldly reoriented its foreign policy toward gender equality.

By Lyric Thompson

Foreign Policy (14.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/38Cpyv1> - Last week, Mexico became the first global south country—and only the third country worldwide—to launch an explicitly feminist foreign policy. With this new policy platform, the government is setting a new global standard and, in its own words, “breaking glass ceilings.”

“The government of Mexico is feminist, and our foreign policy should be, too,” said Foreign Secretary Marcelo Luis Ebrard Casaubón. Starting now, the new policy mandates that gender equality be core to all aspects of Mexican foreign policy.

The first feminist foreign policy was debuted by Sweden in 2014, to “giggles” and suspicion at the time, according to then-Foreign Minister Margot Wallstrom. Canada became the second, with its Feminist International Assistance Policy, in 2017, followed by announcements by Mexico, France, and Luxembourg that such policies were under development. And last week, Mexico publicly rolled out its new policy guidance as all of Mexico's ambassadors and heads of mission were gathered in Mexico City for their annual training and policy updates.

The Mexican policy is already setting the tone for other countries that want to follow suit as they grapple with how best to take on the most pressing issues facing the world today: violence and war, climate change, and structural and social inequality.

But what exactly is a “feminist” foreign policy?

Following more than a year of global consultation and research on the world's handful of existing feminist foreign policies, the International Center for Research on Women has established a working definition for government policy that “prioritizes gender equality and enshrines the human rights of women and other traditionally marginalized groups, allocates significant resources to achieve that vision and seeks through its implementation to disrupt patriarchal and male-dominated power structures across all of its levers of influence (aid, trade, defense and diplomacy), informed by the voices of feminist activists, groups and movements.”

By our measure, the Mexican government has laid out a foundation for what is emerging as a global gold standard. “Mexico is determined to move forward a progressive foreign policy,” said Cristopher Ballinas Valdés, the director-general for human rights and democracy at the Mexican foreign ministry, “with a main focus on promoting human rights, equality, and women's rights. The feminist foreign policy is based on five principles that rule all foreign-policy activities.”

Those five principles include: conducting all aspects of foreign policy with the intent to advance gender equality and a feminist agenda; achieving gender parity at all levels of

staff in the foreign ministry; combatting all forms of gender-based violence, including within the ministry; making equality visible; and practicing intersectional feminism, which is to say, an approach that values not only women's rights but also other intersecting social, economic, and environmental justice issues.

The government of Mexico has opted for a very broad vision for what its policy would achieve—not simply the advancement of women, but also the fulfilment of rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people (the Mexican foreign ministry participated in Mexico City's pride march for the first time last year) and the advancement of broader social and economic justice initiatives. Quoting work by the International Center for Research on Women, the policy explicitly obligates Mexican leadership to advance "issues that others are not prioritizing," including sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as climate change.

Given the prevalence of gender-based violence and femicide in Mexico, the new policy marks a welcome change of pace. With the policy, according to Ballinas Valdés, "Mexico will pay justice to a long overdue agenda on women's and girls' rights." This is the first time such an overt women's rights agenda has been advanced in Mexican foreign policy, and officials inside the ministry have indicated that the establishment of a gender-balanced cabinet in President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration went a long way toward enabling such change.

Mexico's feminist foreign policy commits to an ambitious number of immediate actions across all five areas of engagement, stipulating precise timelines by which they are to be achieved. Trainings, workshops, working groups, and manuals are to be developed and deployed within the first year. By 2024, the government is aiming for full employment parity, equal pay, and the application of a gender lens to every foreign-policy position, resolution, and mandate. This is a tall order—and one that will undoubtedly encounter resistance.

But if past is prologue, Mexico seems positioned to excel. The new policy's antecedents have already been shaping Mexico's behavior internally and on the world stage. Case in point, Mexico took a clear leadership position at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP25) held last month in Spain, where the government promoted gender equality as a nonnegotiable component of any agreement on climate change.

"[Mexico is] simply one of the few countries that comes to the table with gender equality and human rights as a red line," said conference attendee Bridget Burns, a climate activist and the executive director of the Women's Environment and Development Organization. "Many other actors say it's a priority for them, but Mexico showed real strength in not letting these principles become bargaining chips in a process that often dwindles issues down to the lowest common denominator."

The lowest common denominator appeared to be the likely outcome of COP25 at one point, as countries worked together to exclude activists from the negotiations and even locked a number of activists and indigenous women out of in the cold. But Mexican negotiators made sure feminist climate activists had a seat at the table and led a process that ultimately developed a Gender Action Plan, one of the only tangible outcomes in a conference that otherwise "fell short" of meaningful progress on climate initiatives.

"Having witnessed Mexico championing human rights and gender equality in the context of the U.N. climate negotiations, it's exciting to see the launch of this feminist foreign policy, principled on an intersectional feminist approach," Burns said. "We know that to be truly 'feminist,' foreign policy must understand gender equality in the context of all issues, from environment and trade, to peace and economy. We look forward to seeing Mexico put these words into action, and to serving as inspiration for other governments,

particularly given their leadership in the upcoming Beijing+25 Generation Equality Forum.”

That forum marks the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, watershed agreements outlining women’s human rights. It also marks the first major multilateral test of Mexico’s new foreign policy. Mexico and France, which has also recently announced but not yet released a feminist foreign policy, will be co-hosting a “champions only” progressive, multilateral space, where heads of state from progressive countries will gather to make commitments to the next generation of women’s rights issues.

The path forward will not be an easy one. Retrogressive foreign policies, including that of the United States, have instilled little trust in some governments to advance and protect the women’s rights standards laid out 25 years ago. But if Mexico’s level of ambition and the growing number of countries turning their eyes on their own foreign policies are signs of what is to come, the momentum may be just enough to carry this movement forward.

“It’s very encouraging to see,” said Kristina Lunz, a co-founder of the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, “that with Mexico the first global south country presented a feminist foreign policy. In international circles, there still tends to be this biased perception that industrial countries such as Germany would be leading on topics of social justice and equality—but especially when it comes to feminism in foreign policy, Germany and others can learn lots from Mexico.”

MOROCCO: Morocco’s CNDH campaigns for women with disabilities’ rights

The initiative comes in response to a recommendation from the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

By Zakaria Elaraj

Morocco World News (01.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/38nqqPo> - Morocco’s National Council of Human Rights (CNDH) launched on Wednesday a digital campaign in an effort to stop discrimination against women and girls with disabilities.

The initiative also aims to promote the rights of people living with disabilities and raise awareness on respecting the rights of women and girls with disabilities, according to a Council press release.

CNDH initiated the campaign for social media users since social networks reach large segments of society.

Living with a disability adds to the existing challenging situation of women in Morocco, said CNDH President Amna Bouayach in the Council’s statement.

Women and girls with disabilities are like the rest of females in the country, and Moroccans should join forces and stop all forms of bullying of those individuals, Khaoula Sika, CNDH’s Guelmim-Oued Noun regional committee member, said in a video introducing the campaign.

This segment should be engaged in society and enjoy the same rights other people do, said Zhou El Horr, Coordinator of the National Mechanism for the Protection of the

Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In the video, she referenced employment and leadership positions as areas where greater engagement of women with disabilities can better benefit Morocco's society at large.

Taoufik Berdiji, president of CNDH's Laayoune-Sakia El Hamra regional office, said in the video that the situation of women and girls with disabilities is a pivotal case in the CNDH since many females with disabilities suffer discrimination in his region.

CNDH communicated that the campaign is not only the council's duty, it is also a nationwide responsibility and every individual in Morocco should engage and help promote tolerance towards women and girls with disabilities. All segments of society should help sensitize the importance of respecting their rights, CNDH officials stressed in the video.

"We should all join forces to eradicate stereotypes and prejudice that serve to restrict the disabled instead of encouraging them. The objective of CNDH is to ensure that disabled women and girls are participating in the management of public affairs," Bouayach concluded.

NEW ZEALAND: New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern appoints country's first Indigenous female foreign minister

By Julia Hollingsworth

CNN (02.11.2019) - <https://bit.ly/32bcX0Y> - New Zealand appointed its first Indigenous female foreign minister Monday to represent what's shaping up to be one of the most diverse parliaments in the world.

Nanaia Mahuta, who is Māori, the Indigenous people of New Zealand, four years ago also became the country's first female member of parliament to wear a moko kauae, a traditional tattoo on her chin. The country's previous foreign minister, Winston Peters, is also Māori.

"I'm privileged to be able to lead the conversation in the foreign space," Mahuta said, according to national broadcaster Radio New Zealand.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's center-left Labour Party was reelected in a landslide last month, winning 49.1% of the vote according to preliminary results. Taking 64 of the 120 seats, her party was the first to win a majority since the country's current political system was introduced in 1996.

Ardern's incoming parliament looks set to be one of the most diverse in the world. Almost half of the country's lawmakers will be women -- significantly higher than the global average of 25%.

Around 10% of the incoming parliament are openly LGBTQ -- higher than the previous title holder, the United Kingdom, where about 7% of the members of the House of Commons are openly gay, according to a national broadcaster Television New Zealand. New Zealand's new deputy Prime Minister Grant Robertson is also gay.

"This is a cabinet and an executive that is based on merit that also happen to be incredibly diverse and I am proud of that," Ardern said Monday as she announced her cabinet.

"They reflect the New Zealand that elected them," she added.

Who is Nanaia Mahuta?

Mahuta was first elected to parliament in 1996, and has previously held a number of portfolios, including the minister of local government and Māori development.

She is related to the late Māori queen, Te Arikinui Te Atairangikaahu, and the current Māori monarch, Kingi Tuheitia, according to RNZ. The Kīngitanga, or Māori King movement, dates back more than 160 years and is a significant political presence in New Zealand.

In 2016, Mahuta took part in a traditional moko -- or Māori tattooing design -- ceremony, and became the first woman to wear a moko kauae to parliament.

Moko are hugely symbolic and contain information about a person's ancestry, history and status. There are also sacred protocols around tā moko -- the act of applying a moko to a person. Historically, moko were applied with chisels but now tattoo machines are often used.

At the time, Mahuta said she hadn't given a lot of thought to how her tattoo would break new ground. "I've just thought about more a longer projection of my walk in life and kind of the way I want to go forward and make a contribution. That's the main thing for me," she said, according to the RNZ report.

Rukuwai Tipene-Allen, a political journalist for Māori Television who also wears a moko kauae, said Mahuta's appointment was hugely significant.

"The first face that people see at an international level is someone who speaks, looks and sounds like a Māori," she said. "The face of New Zealand is Indigenous."

She said the fact Mahuta wears a moko kauae is hugely empowering.

"It shows that our culture has a place at an international level, that people see the importance of Māori, and the point of difference that being Māori brings to such a role," Tipene-Allen added. "Wearing the markings of her ancestors shows people that there are no boundaries to Māori and where they can go."

Politicians from both sides of the political spectrum congratulated Mahuta on her appointment as foreign minister, with Simon Bridges -- the former leader of the center-right National Party -- saying: "It's an important time internationally and you'll be great."

Green Party politician Golriz Ghahraman -- who was New Zealand's first elected refugee MP -- congratulated Mahuta, saying it was "exciting" that the country was "decolonizing" its voice in foreign affairs.

CNN has reached out to Mahuta for comment.

NIGERIA: Undressing for redress - the significance of Nigerian women's naked protests

Nigerian women use nudity to turn traditional ideas of protest on their heads.

By Bright Alozie

The Conversation (03.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3m76Cf7> - Social media went abuzz on July 23, 2020, when hundreds of women – mostly naked – staged a protest in the northwestern state of Kaduna, Nigeria. Wailing and rolling on the ground, they protested at the killing of people in ongoing attacks on their community.

The protesters, mostly mothers, demanded justice and called on the government, security agencies and international community to intervene.

Such naked protests are not new in Nigeria. Traditionally, among the Igbo and Yoruba of Nigeria, stripping naked signifies a curse against those targeted. Sometimes, mothers strip naked to put a curse on their truant sons or disloyal husbands. In some cases, it signifies their willingness to die for a cause.

Nigerian women have historically employed naked protests to seek redress – with success. In my book chapter contribution on this subject, I documented numerous naked protests dating back to the colonial period. I drew the conclusion that through the spectacle of such protests, women have rewritten the script on their bodies and used nakedness as an instrument of power, rather than shame, in making their voices heard.

Historically, in western and non-western worlds, women have used their bodies to protest unacceptable treatment by those in power. In Africa, the nakedness of women, especially mothers and grandmothers, is a historical and symbolic “shaming” tactic. Women’s enacting nakedness on their own terms disrupts dominant notions that depict their bodies as passive, powerless, or as sexual objects for sale.

A brief history of naked protests

Most studies have focused on the role of clothing in society and demonstrated how it can change the perception of an individual. Sadly, there is little research on naked protests, perhaps because society frowns on public displays of the naked body.

The unclothed female body is a powerful site of protest. By protesting naked, women have resurrected traditional forms of sociopolitical protests and resistance like the custom common among Igbo women known as “sitting on a man” or “making war” with men. This custom was a practice where women showed their disapproval of abusive men, men who failed to provide for their family or who disregarded market rules. Dressed as men in preparation for war, the women wore only loincloths with ferns on their heads, smeared ashes on their faces and carried sticks with palm fronds. They would dance around the house singing lewd and insulting songs that questioned the offender’s manhood, and would pound on the house using their pestles and in severe cases, destroyed the house. They would continue this activity until the offender repented. This act was viewed as the ultimate means by which women sanctioned wrongdoers.

History records several naked or half naked protests by women caused by displeasure with government policies or incidents seen as too dangerous to be ignored. These protests were mostly successful in achieving their objectives.

Naked protests are always employed as a last resort. This was the case in colonial southeastern Nigeria when in 1929, hundreds of naked and half naked women took to the towns of Owerri, Calabar and Aba. They protested harsh colonial policies. An English lieutenant described the women as nearly naked, wearing only wreaths of grass round their heads, waist and knees:

(I began) telling the women not to make noise. They took no notice of me and told me that I was the son of a pig and not of a woman ... (They) were calling the soldiers pigs ... (and) they didn't care if the soldiers cut their throats.

This protest resulted in the famous Ogu Umunwanyi or Aba Women's War. Before the incident, the protesters had employed other means like petitioning the colonial authorities. Eventually, "making war" on the officials became the last resort. About 50 women were killed and 50 others were wounded.

Also, in the 1930s, members of the Abeokuta Women's Union in southwestern Nigeria walked half-naked in protest against the Alake of Abeokuta's political actions and forced him into exile.

On July 8, 2002, about 600 semi-clad or naked women from six communities in the oil-rich southeastern Nigeria occupied the main oil terminal of Chevron Texaco. They protested how their water and land had been contaminated by the presence of Chevron Texaco, through oil spills and gas flares. They accused the company of gross exploitation of the people of the region and not distributing enough of the wealth it obtains from oil. They also demanded infrastructural changes.

Before then, their men had tried but failed. The actions of these women resulted in a peace meeting with Chevron Texaco. The company agreed to hire local workers, contribute to local infrastructure, set up a micro-credit scheme to help village women start businesses of their own, and provide communities with schools, hospitals, water, and electricity systems.

Naked protests also dramatically enact protesters' willingness to put their bodies on the line in order to advance a political cause, such as opposition to government and military interventions. This was the case on May 20, 2017 when some female members of the Indigenous People of Biafra staged a protest in Abiriba, Abia state, against an alleged attack on them by the Nigerian Army. Some women were unclad while others wore undergarments and wrappers.

Similarly, in July 2013, nearly 100 women walked naked through Kokoritown in Delta State to protest the "unacceptable siege" on their community by the Nigerian army.

Concluding insights

The symbolic resonance of protesting naked has ensured the endurance of the "undress tactic" among Nigerian women today. It has also signalled a return to the old fashioned but effective form of women's resistance. To fully understand this symbolism, we must not view the protesting naked female solely in sexual terms, as a commodity or an object without regard to their dignity.

Indeed, the female body is a site of immense power both inside and outside. Through naked protests, women engage in re-scripting and reconfiguring their bodies.

These women who have stripped naked to wage a righteous war must be duly acknowledged. So, when you see "our mothers go naked again", remember that they represent power, subversion and resistance to the dominant scripts engraved on their bodies – scripts of subordination, passivity, sexuality, subservience and vulnerability.

PALESTINE: How one woman with a disability builds a life in Gaza

People with disabilities find strength despite discrimination.

By Paul Aufiero

HRW (03.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3gn4RYS> - "I think I wouldn't have achieved so much in my life without my disability," said Doaa Qashlan, a university graduate and disability rights activist living in Gaza. Doaa, who was born with a physical disability and uses a wheelchair or an electric mobility scooter to move around, has a supportive family. She even became the first in her family to travel abroad. But back home in Gaza, life has been increasingly difficult.

Doaa uses her mobility scooter to get around the inaccessible streets of Gaza. "They're my legs," she says of her assistive devices. A few months ago, Doaa's scooter was damaged. She has still not been able to fix it, she says, as many necessary parts can't be found in Gaza and there's a lack of expertise to repair damaged devices. In part this stems from sweeping Israeli restrictions on the movement of goods and people into and out of Gaza. Today, Doaa says, she feels trapped at home.

Doaa nonetheless maintains a sense of humor, resiliency, and a hope to see things change. She is a member of the Public Relations and Media Board of the Palestinian General Union for People with Disabilities and has collaborated with international and local organizations in Gaza to raise awareness on disability rights. Her work is a testament to her perseverance. Still, life in Gaza can be hard.

New research released on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities describes how Israel's 13-year closure and Hamas authorities' lack of services or efforts to make public spaces accessible contribute to making life extraordinarily difficult for tens of thousands of Palestinians with disabilities in Gaza. "The situation [in Gaza] is already dire," Doaa said. "You see how people in Gaza suffer? People with disabilities suffer double."

Electricity outages are Doaa's biggest daily worry. She must keep her mobility scooter charged. But Gaza's chronic power outages, a product of restrictive Israeli policies and squabbles between Palestinian authorities, leave residents with as little as five hours of electricity per day and up to 15 hours on the best days. For Doaa and other people in Gaza with disabilities, these electricity cuts present serious obstacles to daily life – especially for those who rely on equipment powered by electricity, such as elevators and electric mobility scooters.

Even when she can leave home, Doaa struggles with living in a relatively inaccessible area where it can be difficult for her to move about, and many in her community do not understand her needs. "Our neighbor built a speedbump in our area to slow cars down. He wasn't aware that this could injure us."

Doaa, like others with disabilities in Gaza, particularly women, faces deeply entrenched stigma. There are little to no job prospects and their social circles run small. Even things society places high value on, like marriage, are largely out of reach. For Doaa, this stigma is a constant source of frustration. "One day, a group of girls were speaking about marriage. They mentioned that a girl with a disability got married. One of them jokingly asked, 'I wonder how she got married?' I got angry and asked her, 'Has anyone asked you how you would get married?' The girl did not reply."

Even getting an education presented challenges for Doaa, each step of the way. By grade five, Doaa's muscles had begun to severely weaken and walking became challenging. She recalls an incident in grade six, when she used a walker. "I wanted to go to the bathroom. In order to reach the toilet, I had to walk a long distance on an unpaved, rocky path. Some students pushed me while I was walking, and I fell down and wet myself." When her father came to get her, he took her out of school. It was only at her mother's insistence – her mother even left the house until her father relented – that Doaa returned to school.

Doaa's mother is a constant source of strength for her and her younger sister Abeer, who also has a physical disability and uses a mobility scooter. When Doaa went back to school, she would arrive early to change from her mobility scooter to her wheelchair, and sometimes her mother would go over schoolwork with her while they waited for class to begin. One day, a group of people saw them, and one of them said to Doaa's mother, "Why are you teaching her, you think she will succeed? She's half human, go and give birth to a complete human." Doaa says that when she used to feel depressed and didn't want to go to school at all, sometimes counselors would visit her for psychosocial support. Later Doaa found out her mother had been arranging for that herself.

Doaa received an opportunity to attend a training program in the United Arab Emirates through a United Nations program for young people with disabilities. But after two years, Doaa made the difficult decision to return home. She was distraught coming back to Gaza but enrolled in a university program in office administration. At one point, Doaa had to leave university for a year because she and Abeer had to share one mobility scooter between them, and Abeer needed it to finish secondary school.

Having a disability in Gaza can sometimes be life-threatening. During the war in 2014 between Israel and Palestinian armed groups, Doaa was constantly afraid of being unable to escape danger in the event of an Israeli airstrike. "Each time I got into the bathroom, I was afraid if a nearby escalation took place and I needed to flee quickly, I couldn't. I was already slow." Doaa and her sister would sometimes even hear family members say things like, "Your family might flee and forget you at home."

During the war, Doaa's and Abeer's family did have to evacuate from their home. They went to live with their aunt, whose home was not accessible. Doaa was not able to use her wheelchair in the house and had to crawl to move about. But she was embarrassed to do so in front of her male relatives in the house, so would avoid moving when they were home.

And what if she and her sister needed to flee or quickly escape a building that came under attack? The stress of the fighting, compounded with not knowing what would happen to her and Abeer should their family have to evacuate, weighed on her emotionally. "The most difficult thing was when I heard my sister say, 'I don't want to die and leave you on your own. I don't want you to die and leave me on my own.'"

Today, Doaa draws hope from her friends, all of whom also have disabilities, and from her desire to see the situation change in Gaza. Before her scooter was damaged, Doaa would spend her time at the General Union to work on disability rights-related activities or attend training sessions. She is excited about efforts by local organizations that can help people with disabilities, specifically women and girls. "Focus on youth and a double focus on girls. Girls need support because they're incredibly marginalized. They need to get a space to speak out."

One organization has made a huge difference in her life already. Recently, the nongovernmental group Humanity and Inclusion enhanced Doaa's home to make the

kitchen and bathroom more accessible. "Now I am able to get into the kitchen and make food for me and my family." This small improvement left an enormously positive mark on Doaa's life, highlighting how such modest efforts to improve accessibility can go a long way to relieving the immense barriers that people with disabilities face just trying to live independent lives.

When asked what Israeli and Palestinian authorities should do for the tens of thousands of people with disabilities in Gaza, Doaa had one simple message: "Remember we are humans."

PALESTINE: New report from UN Women brings forth voices of Palestinian women under COVID-19 lockdown

UN Women (09.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3fC5KLu> - "I always dreamed of taking a long holiday and spend it at home with myself, my children and my husband. Now the dream has turned into a nightmare," shares Rawan*, a Palestinian woman who works in the public sector in the West Bank. "I have more burden doing home chores, childcare, teaching... while ensuring that my husband who is doing work from home [has] a quiet space to do that."

Early into the COVID-19 crisis, UN Women, in partnership with Arab World for Research and Development, conducted in-depth interviews with Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza for a new [study](#) that sheds new light on the situation and needs of Palestinian women and girls. More than 30 women-led organizations and woman leaders in the area participated in surveys and meetings that gathered data about women's experiences.

In an effort to curb the spread of the new coronavirus in Palestine, a state of emergency was declared in March, followed by lockdown measures across the West Bank and Gaza. Initially, only female employees with children working in the public sector were relieved of their professional duties to care for their children, reinforcing gender stereotypes that expect women to be caregivers and men to be breadwinners. Later, even when all non-essential government employees were asked to stay home, the burden of domestic work and childcare remained with women.

"We must take care of our own homes and take care of the hygiene measures. My husband is under quarantine in our house and I have moved with my kids to a neighbour's house. I take care of all the responsibilities, the children, the cleaning, budget management, and checking in on my husband's needs," explains Asma* from the West Bank, another respondent to the UN Women survey.

According to the study, 68 per cent of Palestinian women have reported increased unpaid care work since COVID-19 confinement measures took effect.

The situation is even more stressful for women who are expected to work from home, because they are expected to simultaneously take care of their children and housework. When both male and female partners in a household are working remotely, men's paid work is prioritized more than that of women.

Thirty-eight-year-old Um Ahmad, a mother of three, from Nablus, is also feeling the stress: "I must now care for all aspects of my children's welfare. With the introduction of e-learning, I am the only one who is really following up with the children to do their schoolwork. They are confined and stressed, and I must deal with that, but I am also

stressed!” Um Ahmad wants psycho-social support for families as they struggle to cope with the new normal that COVID-19 has ushered in.

“While it is nice to have the family together, my husband [has] nothing to do. He is bored and... Boredom is making him edgy and prone to violence,” shared Heba* from the West Bank, signalling the rising threat of domestic violence—the shadow pandemic—that women around the world are facing during COVID-19.

The Palestinian Working Women Society reported more than 510 calls for support, including from victims of domestic violence between 22 March and 4 April. SAWA, another women’s organization, has reported 3 cases of suicide attempts due to sexual abuse, incest, harassment and attempted rape within a period of one week (9 - 16 April). And these are just the ones that have been reported – reporting of domestic violence is usually lower than the actual rate of incidents, and in times of crisis, many women may not have the opportunity or safety to report violence.

The lockdown measures that are necessary to contain the spread of the virus have created new barriers for women survivors seeking vital services. The restrictions on movement has also normalized the prevalent patriarchal notion that, “a woman’s place is at home”.

Economically, the crisis is expected to hit women’s livelihood harder, since most women work in the informal sector and small businesses. A survey conducted by Arab World for Research and Development showed that 76 per cent of women had lost their income (compared to 65 per cent men). According to a flash survey by UN Women, 95 per cent of women owners of micro, small and medium enterprises said their work had already been impacted by COVID-19. Furthermore, the report found that almost 25 per cent of Palestinian women working in the private sector have no contract or pay protection.

Amal Hamad, Palestinian Minister of Women’s Affairs stresses that economic violence and domestic violence are intrinsically linked under present circumstances. “As a result of the economic conditions, loss of jobs, and with the current state of anxiety, there is deterioration in the economic situation of women, and this is leading to economic violence in the home and is also higher rates of domestic violence.”

To mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on Palestinians, UN Women’s report makes a strong case for prioritizing gender considerations in the country’s COVID-19 response plan.

“The pandemic is not showing us new problems; it is worsening known issues,” says UN Women Special Representative for Palestine, Maryse Guimond. “We know that crises can worsen the economic, social and political situation of women and girls, deepening existing inequalities. But this can also be an opportunity to move forward and not go backward.”

To emerge from this crisis with resilience, and to build back better, gender equality must take centre-stage in all aspects of recovery efforts—from ensuring that stimulus plans address the needs of both men and women equally to encouraging and promoting the role of men at home and in childcare as equal partners in the household. For more recommendations, read the full report.

PALESTINE: Palestinian men take up cooking in quarantine

Forced to stay at home due to precautions against COVID-19, some Palestinian men are learning to cook for the first time in their lives.

By Sanaa Saida

Al-Monitor (20.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2xn3tDG> - Samar Titi laughs and says her husband, Hassan, has hardly ever stepped into their kitchen throughout 27 years of marriage, not even to pour himself a cup of tea.

One reason was that Hassan, a video journalist, was rarely home. The father of three would have coffee with his wife in the morning, then rush to work most days of the week.

But since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus in the Palestinian territories a month ago, Hassan, like most of his colleagues, is staying home. In April, the Palestinian government declared a state of emergency and shut down public places, including schools, universities and markets.

At home in Nablus in the West Bank, Hassan dabbled in the kitchen and prepared his first dish: msakhan, a Palestinian delicacy of chicken, onions, olive oil and bread.

"It was delicious," Samar said, explaining she had little to do with the preparations. Her husband had found the recipe online and didn't consult her.

Hassan said, "I was tired of doing nothing and picking up arguments with my wife because I was restless and on edge. I was surprised to discover that there are a lot of men cooking. At first, I felt shy cooking in front of my wife and daughters."

But once he discovered that he could, Hassan started working with Samar in the kitchen. Samar said she was "so happy" because the lockdown afforded her some time with her husband.

Then Dina, their youngest daughter, a student of marketing and human resources, filmed her father and posted the videos on Facebook.

"I saw my parents working together on one of our family's favorite dishes that we had not done before, as we did not have time," she said. "So I decided to record these special moments and share them with my friends. Cooking, baking sweets or coming up with healthy recipes is also a way of spending time together."

In the Gaza Strip, where the situation is more difficult because of the Israeli blockade, Mohammed al-Ramlawi and his wife Noor also cook together at home in Gaza City.

Mohammed also helps Noor clean the house — which is perhaps even more rare than a Palestinian man cooking, as men, in Palestinian society, typically do not help with domestic affairs.

Noor said the quarantine has changed the habits of some men, who are putting aside the mentality that real men do not do housework. But she admitted that her husband would rather cook than clean.

Mohammed said he had never helped in the house over six years of marriage because it was neither necessary nor requested. "Most of the time, I was working outside," he said. "When I came home in the evening, everything was done and ready."

Both the Ramlawis and the Titis have found a way to cooperate and help each other during these days of self-isolation. "There have been many reports of violence — both toward women and children — in quarantine in the Palestinian lands," Laila Abu Aisha, a family counselor from Gaza City, told Al-Monitor.

"Many men who are forced to stay home suffer from stress and frustration, particularly if they have lost their income," she said. "Fear, insecurity and stress negatively affect their psychology and they resort to violence — they abuse their wives and children."

She called on the Palestinian government to help alleviate Palestinians' financial difficulties and protect women who are victims of domestic violence.

Women's groups active in the Middle East have warned against a potential increase in domestic violence since the coronavirus outbreak, saying that tight-knit family structures and multigenerational living conditions in confined spaces could increase violence. Stressful situations often lead to physical abuse, which was high in Palestine even before the added stress of the coronavirus.

Though many women's groups have warned of increased domestic violence in the Middle East, no figures have been released since the start of the pandemic in the region.

RUSSIA: Ensuring Russia's sex workers' rights essential for wider gender equality

Ensuring sex workers' rights was essential, not just for the workers themselves, but for any country's wider society, including public health.

By Ed Holt

IPS (27.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2YcVMuQ> - Despite seeing a shift in attitudes towards them in recent years, Russian sex workers say they continue to struggle with marginalisation and criminalisation which poses a danger to them and the wider public.

- Sex work is illegal in Russia and, historically, public attitudes to the women, and more recently men, involved in providing it have been predominantly negative, and often virulently hostile.
- This has led to them being marginalised and with little protection against violence and prejudice not just among the general public and clients, but also the police and wider justice system.
- However, they say they have seen a change in the last two to three years as some of their work campaigning for rights and awareness of their work, has begun to bear fruit in the last few years.

"Media have begun to talk and write much more about sex work. Much of this has been more positive to sex workers, ...and both their tone and rhetoric have become more tolerant," Marina Avramenko of the Russian Forum of Sex Workers, which offers legal consultancy and support to sex workers, told IPS.

She added: "Sometimes media outlets conduct informal opinion polls about attitudes in society towards sex work and according to the results of these informal surveys, it is evident that more people have begun to talk about the need to allow sex work."

- Sex work, which has been illegal in Russia since the Russian Federation was formed in 1991, is punishable both under criminal law and Russian civil offences legislation.
- Organising, or forcing someone into, prostitution, is a criminal offence carrying a penalty of up to eight years in jail. But sex work itself is a civil offence punishable by fines of up to 30 Euros.

Sex workers are one of the most marginalised groups in Russia today.

This is down in part to the influence of the Orthodox Church, which has grown in popularity in the decades since the fall of communism, on society and government policy. As with many other minority groups, such as the LGBTI community, sex workers have been demonised by the clergy.

Politicians also often publicly speak of sex workers in derogative or sometimes violently hostile terms.

"A negative attitude towards sex workers has been formed in society through propaganda and the Church. Sex workers are not recognised as a 'social group' and when people call for them to be killed or raped, or spread hate against them, they are not punished.

"False myths are also spread in society that sex workers destroy families, that they infect people with various diseases, and that sex workers are associated with organised crime," said Avramenko.

Criminalisation itself also fuels this marginalisation.

International rights groups, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have repeatedly highlighted the effects of criminalisation of sex work.

They point out it often leaves sex workers with no protection from police, unable to report crimes against them during their work for fear of getting a criminal record, or having their earnings confiscated or their work reported to others.

This means that the perpetrators of the crimes against them know they can act with impunity, while police can also abuse, extort or physically and sexually assault them with equal impunity.

Indeed, this is often the case in Russia. According to the Russian Forum of Sex Workers, informal surveys have shown that in about 80 percent of police raids on brothels or independent sex workers' establishments, officers beat sex workers.

Some sex workers also recount horrific incidents they know of colleagues gang-raped by police, or held for days at police stations and beaten and starved.

"In general, police officers feel even more impunity than criminals and commit many crimes against sex workers," said Avramenko.

Because of this, sex workers seldom report crimes to police. And, even if they do, these are rarely, or poorly investigated.

Evgenia Maron of the Russian Forum of Sex Workers' Executive Committee, spoke to IPS about some of the cases which the group had been involved in, including that of sex worker from Gelendzhik who was raped. Investigators refused to initiate proceedings against her attacker on the grounds that "the applicant provides sexual services, which means that the perpetrator's actions are not socially dangerous".

He was eventually jailed for five years after Russia's Commissioner for Human Rights intervened.

In another case, a man filmed the robbery and rape of a sex worker in Ufa and forced his victim on camera to say that she was a prostitute as he was sure this would guarantee his impunity. He was eventually convicted but was sentenced to just over two years in jail and released immediately because he had already served that time in prison awaiting trial.

Sex workers also struggle to access lawyers. According to Maron, out of 250 cases where sex workers ended up in court under Administrative Code offences, only two were represented by lawyers in their hearings.

International rights and health organisations have also warned of the serious health threat posed by marginalisation of certain groups in society, including sex-workers.

Russia has one of the world's worst HIV epidemics with more than a million people infected and infection rates running higher than in sub-Saharan Africa. The epidemic has been driven largely by injection drug use but HIV is increasingly transmitted sexually and sex workers have been identified as particularly vulnerable.

A study published in 2016 by the Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN) in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, showed more than a quarter of sex workers had faced physical or sexual violence by police officers and that police persecution deprived them of the opportunity to work in safe conditions, choose clients, or use condoms with every client.

But stigma and fear of their work being exposed mean sex workers struggle to access proper healthcare.

"Sex workers face obstacles in receiving medical care, primarily because there are very few special programs for them, and when they turn to state healthcare services, sex workers hide because of concerns about stigma that they are engaged in sex work," said Maron.

Maron said that ensuring sex workers' rights was essential, not just for the workers themselves, but for any country's wider society, including public health.

"In the event of violence, a sex worker cannot control the use of condoms, for example. Sex workers having greater guarantees of protection from violence, being able to file complaints with the police without obstacles, and rapists being punished to the fullest extent of the law will lead to positive health outcomes in the long run.

"It is violence that prevents necessary protection against STIs and other infections which have an important impact on public health," she said.

In a few months a new version of Russia's Administrative Code, which governs civil law offences, is due to be approved by lawmakers.

During its drafting phase Russian rights organisations and sex worker groups campaigned to have penalties for sex work stripped from the new version of the code.

The fines are officially recorded in an Interior Ministry database and employers running background checks on job applicants will often reject those they see have fines for sex work. There have also been reported incidents of the children of sex workers being refused access to higher education or employment in the public sector after these records have been found.

"[Having] prostitution as an offence destroys all opportunities for [these] women in their future lives," Irina Maslova, director of the Silver Rose sex workers' rights movement, was quoted as saying in the Kommersant newspaper in March.

The calls were ignored and relevant articles in the current code on sex work will remain in the new code.

Many rights groups say that the work undertaken by groups like the Russian Sex Workers Forum to try and guarantee sex workers' rights is essential to ensuring wider gender equality.

In a 2017 report, the Global Network of Sex Work Projects argued that "ultimately, there can be no gender equality if sex workers' human rights are not fully recognised and protected".

The group said: "Sex workers' rights activists, feminist allies and human rights advocates have long held that the agency of sex workers must be recognised and protected, that all aspects of sex work should be decriminalised, and that sex work should be recognised as work and regulated under existing labour frameworks.

"Given that the majority of sex workers are women and many come from LGBT communities, protecting sex workers' rights is imperative to achieving gender equality as defined under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)".

According to a policy brief on sexual health and rights by Women Deliver, an international organisation advocating around the world for gender equality and the health and rights of girls and women, "policies that address the often tenuous legal positions of sex workers should ensure that they are not further victimised by laws that could potentially lead to incarceration".

"Sex workers are often forced to live and work on the margins of society due to the criminalisation and stigmatisation of their work; this provides them with little possibility for legal recourse if they experience any kind of gender-based violence. Strong legal and policy frameworks must include provisions that reflect the complete and diverse experiences and challenges women face in order to truly provide comprehensive protection of women's sexual health and rights," Women Deliver state.

Meanwhile, Russians sex workers continue to call for decriminalisation, although, Avramenko argues, it will only help to a certain extent.

"By itself, decriminalisation will not change much," said Avramenko, citing the experience of sex workers in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan where sex work is decriminalised.

"There, sex work is not punishable, but the police and the state are constantly finding ways to violate sex workers' rights," she said.

She added decriminalisation needed to be accompanied by greater public awareness of sex work and its benefits for society as well as rooting out police corruption.

It appears unlikely this will happen any time soon with the church continuing to wield significant influence over political policy and public opinion, and the recent lack of change to civil law offences for sex work.

Maron said that for activists like her there was little they could do than carry on their work.

"We will continue to try to improve access to healthcare and justice for sex workers and open dialogue about what sex work is and what interaction with a sex worker means for wider society," she said.

Their work does seem to be having some effect though, as the change in media reporting and surveys showing a more positive public attitude to sex work suggest.

"This is down to our work," said Avramenko.

SAUDI ARABIA: The case of Salma al-Shehab sentenced to 34 years in prison to be raised at the UN

Two NGOs have submitted a written statement to the 51st session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva

HRWF/ CAP (23.08.2022) – Text of the written statement about the sentencing of Salma al-Shehab and the male guardian system in Saudi Arabia:

"CAP/ Conscience et Liberté (Paris) and Human Rights Without Frontiers (Brussels) are deeply concerned about the sentencing of a Saudi PhD student to 34 years in prison and the deterioration of women's rights in Saudi Arabia.

A 34-year old PhD student sentenced to 34 years in prison and a 34-year travel ban afterwards, a cynical and cruel game with this number

At mid-August 2022, **Salma al-Shehab**, a Saudi 34-year old PhD student from the University of Leeds, was sentenced under the kingdom's counter-terrorism and cybercrime laws to a heavy penalty: 34 years in prison and a 34-year travel ban after her release for following and retweeting messages from Saudi women's rights activists, including Loujain al-Hathloul ranked third in the "Top 100 Most Powerful Arab Women 2015" and the winner of the Vaclav Havel Human Rights Prize in 2020.

The ruling is the longest prison sentence given to a Saudi women's rights defender, marking an escalation in MBS crackdown on dissent.

She was arrested in January 2021 while on holiday in Saudi Arabia, having been targeted by the authorities. She was held in prolonged solitary confinement for 285 days before she was brought to trial, which violates international standards and Saudi Arabia's Law of Criminal Procedures. She was also denied access to legal representation throughout her pre-trial detention, including during interrogations.

Salma al-Shehab, who was a postgraduate researcher in the final year of her PhD studies in the School of Medicine at the University of Leeds, had used her Twitter account -- of around 2,700 followers -- to follow, like, and share posts from Saudi activists or dissidents in exile.

Initially, the mother of two young sons (six and four years old) was sentenced by a special terrorist court to serve six years in prison -- three of which were suspended -- for "causing public unrest and destabilising civil and national security". But prosecutors requested that she face new charges, including for "spreading false and malicious rumours on Twitter" and on 15 August, an appeals court handed down the new sentence of 34 years in prison.

Salma al-Shehab comes from the Shia Muslim minority, who has long been discriminated against in Saudi Arabia.

CAP/ Conscience et Liberté (Paris) and Human Rights Without Frontiers (Brussels) consider that

- **The verdict is a mockery of justice and a message of threats and intimidation from Crown Prince Mohamed Bin-Salman**
- **The ruling is an egregious violation of freedom of thought and freedom of speech**
- **Her case is being instrumentalized to frighten women's rights activists and human rights defenders**
- **The judgement sets a dangerous precedent for female activists in the country, who are already subjected to unprecedented arrest campaigns, severe torture, and sexual harassment and ask for the immediate and unconditional release of Salma al-Shehab.**

Home detention and male guardianship

A group of Saudi women activists has launched a campaign on Twitter to raise awareness about and protest against the violence many of them still endure amid timid attempts at reform.

Using the [#HomeDetainees](#) hashtag, the Twitter campaign is aimed at raising awareness about the conditions of women "who languish at home", targeting the male guardianship system (husband, father or brother). Women inside and outside the country share experiences of suffering. For many, the home is "a woman's grave and man's paradise".

The heavy restrictions on women's movements, personal development and professional fulfillment – the legacy of an archaic and patriarchal society favoured by a reactionary vision of Islam – are embodied in the male guardianship system, which denies women their freedom.

The initiative allows women to share on social media their personal experiences as "prisoners" in their own homes and highlights the limits imposed on their social life.

The campaign's goal is to abolish altogether the male guardianship system, which places women's lives under men's control, be they fathers, husbands or brothers, who can decide their fate in terms of "education, work and healthcare".

The campaign is also demanding that Saudi women be granted the right to "movement, independence and decision-making" so that they can be free in their personal life and not feel "trapped" in their homes.

"My prison suffocates my passions and aspirations," wrote one user of the hashtag who did not use her real name. "It chokes off my desires, capabilities, ambitions," and "rendered me severely depressed and obsessive, as well as afflicted me with thousands of psychological ailments".

Another user described life as a woman in Saudi Arabia as akin to being "assaulted with all forms of violence on the psychological, physical, and material level".

The constant monitoring denies women "the privacy of closing the door of the room with a key," said another, making some feel like an "immobile piece of furniture in a living room", seeing "their age and youth passing while they are trapped between four walls".

The reforms that the controversial Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) has introduced since 2019 have touched social and religious life, allowing for example women to drive and go to stadiums (albeit under certain restrictions), and boosting the entertainment industry.

However, the arrests of senior officials and businessmen, the crackdown on activists and critics and the Khashoggi affair have raised questions about the extent of change.

CAP/ Conscience et Liberté (Paris) and Human Rights Without Frontiers (Brussels) support the [#HomeDetainees](#) hashtag movement and urge the international community to press the Saudi authorities to abolish the male guardianship.

For interviews in French or English, contact w.fautre@hrwf.org

SAUDI ARABIA: Saudi women activists launch campaign against home detention and male guardianship

Using the [#HomeDetainees](#) hashtag, the Twitter campaign is aimed at raising awareness about the conditions of women, targeting the male guardianship system (husband, father or brother). Women inside and outside the country share experiences of suffering. For many, the home is "a woman's grave and man's paradise".

Asia News (01.02.2022) - <https://bit.ly/32Z8cLC> - A group of Saudi women activists has launched a campaign on Twitter to raise awareness about and protest against the violence many of them still endure amid timid attempts at reform.

The heavy restrictions on women's movements, personal development and professional fulfillment – the legacy of an archaic and patriarchal society favoured by a reactionary vision of Islam – are embodied in the male guardianship system, which denies women their freedom.

The initiative allows women to share on social media their personal experiences as "prisoners" in their own homes and highlights the limits imposed on their social life.

Activists chose the hashtag [#HomeDetainees](#) to increase awareness and knowledge about "women who languish at home", a place that is "a woman's grave and man's paradise".

The campaign's goal is to abolish altogether the male guardianship system, which places women's lives under men's control, be they fathers, husbands or brothers, who can decide their fate in terms of "education, work and healthcare".

The campaign is also demanding that Saudi women be granted the right to "movement, independence and decision-making" so that they can be free in their personal life and not feel "trapped" in their homes.

In recent weeks, several women have used the platform to share personal experiences of suffering, deprivation as well as physical and spiritual pain.

"My prison suffocates my passions and aspirations," wrote one user who did not use her real name. "It chokes off my desires, capabilities, ambitions," and "rendered me severely depressed and obsessive, as well as afflicted me with thousands of psychological ailments".

Another user described life as a woman in Saudi Arabia as akin to being "assaulted with all forms of violence on the psychological, physical, and material level".

The constant monitoring denies women "the privacy of closing the door of the room with a key," said another, making some feel like an "immobile piece of furniture in a living room", seeing "their age and youth passing while they are trapped between four walls".

In trying to free the country from dependence on oil, the basis of the "Vision 2030" program, Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) is seeking, albeit carefully, to change the fundamentalist basis of [Islam](#) and social life in the country.

The [reforms](#) he introduced since 2019 have touched social and [religious life](#), allowing for example women to drive and go to stadiums (albeit under certain restrictions), and boosting the entertainment industry.

However, the [arrests of senior officials and businessmen](#), the [crackdown on activists and critics](#), and the [Khashoggi affair](#) have raised questions about the extent of change.

Still, the campaign has garnered support and solidarity from abroad, as evinced by the message of a woman from Kuwait who claims to "share pain and suffering" felt by Saudi women.

It also comes in the wake of the sudden release of two members of the royal family, Princess Basmah and her daughter Souhoud Al Sharif, who were arrested in 2019 and held in Al Ha'ir maximum security prison.

Detained without formal charges, their imprisonment was likely prompted by their complaints over the treatment of women, the male guardianship system, and their opposition to the war in Yemen.

SAUDI ARABIA: Saudi military opens first women's section

The initiative is the first to allow women to climb the ladder towards senior ranks.

By Aseel Bashraheel

Arab News (20.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2vbqJ67> - Saudi military chief of staff, Gen. Fayyad Al-Ruwaili, launched the first military section for women in the Saudi Arabian Armed Forces on Sunday.

The director general of admission and enlistment, Maj. Gen. Imad Al-Aidan, explained the regulations of acceptance, and allocated locations where the female staff will be stationed.

Under the initiative to incorporate more women into the field, previously announced in October 2019, women can now join the military as lance corporals, corporals, sergeants, and staff sergeants in the Royal Saudi Land Forces, Air Force, Saudi Arabian Navy, Air Defense Forces, Strategic Missile Forces and Armed Forces Medical Services.

The initiative is the first to allow women to climb the ladder towards senior ranks.

Former Shoura Council member Haya Al-Muni'I previously told Asharq Al-Awsat that these new laws support women's rights and capabilities in the Kingdom's military.

"Naturally, they will enter a new sphere of work. It's a reflection of a national belief in the equality between women and men," she said.

The initiative is part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 Program, pushing for the empowerment of women and giving them more leadership positions, and highlighting the significance of their involvement across different fields.

SAUDI ARABIA: Repressive site for Dakar Rally

As Amaury Sport Race proceeds, women activists sit in prison.

HRW (03.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2uzRlXr> - The Amaury Sport Organisation should use its decision to move the Dakar Rally to Saudi Arabia to denounce the persecution of women's rights advocates in the country, Human Rights Watch, MENA Rights Group, and 11 other international human rights organizations said today. The 2020 Dakar Rally – formerly known as the Paris-Dakar Rally – will begin on January 5, 2020, in Jeddah, and finish on January 17, 2020, 9,000 kilometers later, in Al-Qiddiya.

"The Amaury Sport Organisation and race drivers at the Dakar Rally should speak out about the Saudi government's mistreatment of women's rights activists for advocating for the right to drive," said Minky Worden, global initiatives director at Human Rights Watch. "Fans, media, and race teams shouldn't be blinded by the rally's spectacle while Saudi Arabia 'sports-washes' the kingdom's jailing of peaceful critics."

The Dakar Rally is an annual off-road endurance race organized by the French Amaury Sport Organisation. In April, the company announced that the 2020 rally would be held throughout Saudi Arabia as part of a five-year partnership with its government.

Sponsors, broadcasters, and athletes are affected by sports organizations' choices to hold major events in countries that violate basic human rights, the groups said. By agreeing to a five-year relationship with Saudi Arabia, the Amaury Sport Organisation should also agree to adopt and carry out a human rights policy that would identify risks and make use of its leverage to promote respect for human rights in Saudi Arabia and across its operations. FIFA, the global football organization, and other major companies have adopted such policies in accordance with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Since the murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018, Saudi Arabia has faced increased international criticism over its human rights record – particularly its lack of transparency regarding the investigation of Khashoggi's murder and its leading role in a military coalition responsible for serious violations of the laws of war in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia has also created one of the most hostile environments for human rights defenders in recent years, arbitrarily detaining dozens of rights advocates. They include Loujain al-Hathloul, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sadah, and Nouf Abdulaziz, who advocated women's right to drive and an end to the discriminatory male guardianship system. While some others have been temporarily released, they and the four who remain in detention are still on trial for their peaceful activism. Several activists have alleged that they were tortured in detention, including with electric shocks, flogging, sexual threats, and other ill-treatment.

"More than a dozen women drivers will take part in the Dakar Rally while Saudi women activists languish in jail for promoting the right to drive," said Inès Osman, director of MENA Rights Group. "Saudi Arabia should not get a free lane because it is hosting a prominent sporting event like the Dakar Rally."

Human Rights Watch, MENA Rights Group, and various other groups urge Dakar organizers, participants, and official broadcasters to press Saudi authorities to immediately release all detained Saudi women's rights defenders and drop the charges against them. The Amaury Sport Organisation should engage with human rights advocates and adopt a human rights policy to ensure that its operations do not contribute to human rights violations.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises outline companies' duties to prevent or mitigate adverse human rights impacts resulting from business operations. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights provide that business enterprises have a responsibility to "avoid causing or contributing to adverse human rights impacts through their own activities," "address such impacts when they occur," and "seek to prevent them."

"The Amaury Sport Organisation has an opportunity to join other sporting bodies in advancing respect for human rights where they hold events," said Bénédicte Jeannerod, France director at Human Rights Watch. "Adopting and abiding by a human rights policy will mean avoiding having to endorse a repressive host country's abusive record."

SCOTLAND: Scotland becomes first country to provide period products for free

Tampons, sanitary towels and other period products will have to be available free of cost in Scotland.

By Pierre-Paul Bermingham

POLITICO (25.11.2020) - <https://politi.co/2JqD0us> - Scotland became the first country in the world to make feminine hygiene products available for free as the Scottish Parliament unanimously passed the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act on Tuesday evening.

The [law](#) requires local authorities to ensure period products such as tampons or sanitary towels are available free of cost in their area. Schools, universities, and other education institutions must also have free period products in their restrooms, as must a number of public buildings.

Scottish Labour MSP Monica Lennon introduced the bill in April 2019 and led the legislative effort. "Periods should never be a barrier to education or push anyone into

poverty,” said Lennon, also the spokesperson for health and sport of her party. “Women, girls and all people who menstruate deserve period dignity,” she added.

A study in May by [Plan International UK](#) found that 30 percent of girls aged 14-21 struggled to access sanitary products during the lockdown in the United Kingdom.

Lennon thanked grassroots activists who played an important role in campaigning for the measure, as well as precursors such as the North Ayrshire council, which had implemented a policy of free sanitary products in 2018.

Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said she was “proud to vote for this groundbreaking legislation.”

Though Scotland is the first nation to make feminine hygiene freely available to all, a handful of countries have banned the “tampon tax” – the levying of VAT on sanitary products.

In Europe, Ireland is the only country with no tampon tax. The EU only allows zero-rate VAT derogations on products which were zero-rated before EU legislation.

SOUTH KOREA: Lee Hyo-jae, champion of women’s rights in South Korea, dies at 95

Ms. Lee was a prominent activist and a founder of women’s studies programs. She also stood up to the country’s dictators.

By Michael Astor

The New York Times (14.11.2020) - <https://nyti.ms/3f86edt> - When Lee Hyo-jae learned of a university colleague’s research into the Korean “comfort women” taken by the Japanese military for use as sex slaves during World War II, she came to view the government-sanctioned enslavement as one of history’s most brutal war crimes.

She spent the next two decades fighting to bring attention to the issue and to secure redress from Japan. But that was only one of many causes taken up by Ms. Lee, one of South Korea’s foremost activists on behalf of women’s rights and democracy.

She helped abolish South Korea’s patriarchal naming system, allowing people to use two surnames to reflect their heritage from both parents. She helped establish a quota requiring that half of a party’s candidates running for the National Assembly be women. She pushed for equal pay for equal work.

Ms. Lee died on Oct. 4, 2020, at a hospital in Changwon, in the country’s southeast. She was 95. The cause was sepsis, her nephew Lynn Rowe said.

“In the dark times when the stars were brighter, she was one of the most brilliant,” President Moon Jae-in said in a statement after her death. He posthumously awarded her a national medal, an honor she declined in 1996 because the same medal was being given to someone she believed to be a government agent planted within the women’s movement.

Along with her work on behalf of women, Ms. Lee was also active in the struggle for democracy when South Korea was under dictatorial rule, and was a forceful advocate for the reunification of the two Koreas.

She was among a group of 30 female activists, including Gloria Steinem and the Nobel Peace laureates Leymah Gbowee and Mairead Corrigan-Maguire, who received international attention for making a rare trip in 2015 across the Demilitarized Zone separating the North and South to promote disarmament and peace between the two countries, which are technically still at war.

Ms. Lee was a professor emeritus of sociology at the prestigious Ewha Womans University, where she inspired generations of young women. Many became leading feminists and rose to key positions in liberal governments. Ms. Lee turned down a number of offers to enter politics, preferring her roles as professor and activist.

In her later years, Ms. Lee helped found the Miracle Library, a national network of libraries aimed at children and teens in rural areas.

Lee Hyo-jae was born on Nov. 4, 1924, in Masan, a precinct of Changwon in Gyeongsang Province, during the Japanese occupation of Korea. Her father, Lee Yak-shin, was a Presbyterian minister and leader in the church and her mother, Lee Oak-kyung, founded and ran an orphanage.

When she was a young woman, her parents brought her to Seoul for an arranged marriage but Ms. Lee ran away, believing it would interfere with her ambitions, Mr. Rowe said. She never married.

A few years later her father met Jobe Couch, an American serviceman attached to the U.S. Embassy in Korea. Mr. Couch, who was married but had no children, became impressed by Ms. Lee's younger sister Hyo-suk and offered to take her back with him to the United States to gain a college education. The sister, however, refused to go without Ms. Lee and so he brought them both in 1945.

It wasn't easy. Mr. Couch had to enlist the help of an Alabama congressman, Carl Elliott, to obtain visas and he had to lobby the University of Alabama to accept the sisters on full scholarships even though they did not speak English.

Ms. Lee earned a bachelor's degree at Alabama and went on to earn a master's in sociology from Columbia University before returning to South Korea in 1957.

She founded the sociology department at Ewha the following year. She began teaching the school's first course in women's studies in 1977, which led to the development of South Korea's first graduate level women's studies program.

"She was the most distinguished woman leader at that time," Jung Byung-joon, a history professor at Ewha, said in an email, and she became an advocate for human rights and democratization. "It was very challenging and dangerous choice for her to join the anti-regime movement."

She was fired from Ewha in 1980 for her opposition to the military regime in power at the time, but was reinstated in 1986 as the country was returning to democracy.

Ms. Lee is survived by her daughter Hee-kyung and her sister, who now goes by Hyo Suk Rowe, and two other sisters, Sung Suk Gaber and Unwha Shin.

She was especially passionate about the cause of the “comfort women.” As many as 200,000 women from Korea and other Asian countries were conscripted as sex slaves for Japanese troops beginning in the 1930s.

After decades of denial, the Japanese government in 1992 acknowledged its involvement. South Korea and Japan reached a settlement in 2015 that involved an apology from the Japanese government and \$8.3 million to provide care for the surviving women, who numbered around 45 at the time.

“Japan’s crime against the women is unprecedented, even among the brutal war histories of humankind, because this enslavement of Korean women was carried out systematically as an official policy of the Japanese government,” Ms. Lee told the Los Angeles Times in 1994, when a memorial library was dedicated in Koreatown. “It’s ironic that the first memorial to the women should be in America.”

SPAIN: Spain will now fine companies that don’t reveal gender pay gap data

Ministers say closing the gap is crucial to COVID-19 economic recovery.

By Erica Sanchez & Leah Rodriguez

Global Citizen (14.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3jnE3I5> - Spain is starting to take steps to hold companies accountable for contributing to the gender pay gap.

The Spanish government enacted measures on Tuesday requiring that companies release employee salary information or pay a fine, according to the Associated Press (AP).

The regulation, approved earlier this year, will fine companies €187,000 (\$220,000) if they do not share how they decide base salaries and other benefits with employees.

Under the new law, companies that employ more than 50 people also have to file their four-year strategy for balancing the number of male and female employees at their workplace.

“The message is very clear: women must be paid the same as men for doing the same jobs,” Equality Minister Irene Montero said at a news conference after a weekly cabinet meeting, according to Reuters.

Montero went on to warn that the government needs to take action and help prevent the gender pay gap from worsening due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ending the pay gap will be crucial to economic recovery, she added.

Women were one of the groups hit hardest by unemployment during the pandemic, according to government data.

The regulations aim to “bring to the surface labor inequalities and give workers the tools to eliminate them,” Labor Minister Yolanda Díaz said, according to the AP.

Díaz also called the gender pay gap a “democratic aberration,” at a press conference, according to the AP.

Although Spain is one of the top 10 countries for gender equality, women in the country still earn 22% less than their male colleagues, the Spanish government reports. What’s

more, nearly 27% of people living in poverty are women — 2% more than the number of men living in poverty.

The overrepresentation of women in low-paying industries, the imbalanced care burden placed on women, discrimination, and lack of female representation in executive positions all contribute to the pay gap across the European Union.

Spain's new gender pay gap laws are part of the country's left-wing coalition government's efforts to protect women's rights since coming into power in January, according to Reuters. The government also cracked down on sexual violence laws in March, deeming all non-consensual sex as rape.

"You can't play around with fundamental rights," Díaz said.

TANZANIA: Witchcraft accusations and cataracts: The effects of open-fire cooking in Tanzania

By Rumbi Chakamba

Devex (17.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2J7if7I> - Three years ago, 66-year-old Christine Chizimu woke up to find a dead snake in front of her house in Kihumulo village in northwestern Tanzania. Soon afterward, her brothers accused her of being a witch, causing her to believe it was all orchestrated by her family in a bid to run her out of the village and grab her land. But she said many people in the community were quick to believe these accusations because of her appearance.

Chizimu, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, has a full head of gray hair and bloodshot eyes. She said that at the time of the accusations, she could not see properly and would often stumble as she was walking or ask those she was speaking to to move closer so that she could recognize them.

"Many of the children in the village were already afraid of me, and they would say I am a witch and run away from me. When a family member came forward and accused me of witchcraft, many began to believe this as it was coming from within my family," she said.

Though activists for the rights of older adults have largely succeeded in educating communities that symptoms — such as bloodshot eyes — are caused by smoke from cooking and not a sign that someone is a witch, emerging research has shown that the negative effects of smoke on the eyes may go beyond these traditional beliefs.

Household air pollution has been identified as a risk factor for cataracts, the number one cause of blindness in low- and middle-income countries. Experts have called for improved access to modern energy cooking services to counter this and meet the clean-cooking target under Sustainable Development Goal 7.

Witchcraft in Tanzania

Although both witchcraft and accusing someone of practicing witchcraft are illegal in Tanzania, a Pew Research Center poll conducted in 2010 showed that more than 90% of Christians and Muslims, who make up nearly 97% of the population, believe in witchcraft.

According to HelpAge Tanzania, older women like Chizimu are often the targets of witchcraft accusations. Such accusations can lead to abuse from their families and community members and, in some cases, murder. In 2013, 765 older people were reported to have been murdered as a result of witchcraft accusations; two-thirds of these were women.

Joseph Mbasha, program manager at HelpAge Tanzania, said that most of these issues arose from perceptions and little understanding. In some areas, women were considered to be witches if they had bloodshot eyes, despite the fact that they spend a lot of time cooking using firewood or cow dung, which affects the eyes.

In response, the NGO, along with other civil society organizations and the government, initiated national awareness and sensitization training sessions with community members in various groups. Between 2014 and 2018, HelpAge Tanzania trained over 160,000 people in its project catchment area in the Lake Zone regions of Shinyanga, Mwanza, Simiyu, and Geita.

"The situation has really calmed down. It has almost normalized. We are now receiving very few cases of witchcraft killings. For the last year overall countrywide, we had 11 cases that were reported. In the previous year, we had 29, and the year before was 56, so it is really lowering down," Mbasha said.

Possible links to cataracts

When accusations were leveled against Chizimu, she approached Kwa Wazee, a local NGO that focuses on the rights of older adults. It assisted her in reporting the case to the community leader, who intervened on her behalf.

Last year, the organization also referred Chizimu to a mobile eye screening clinic, where she was found to have cataracts in both her eyes. She has since had cataract removal surgery on her left eye, with a recommendation to also have the procedure for her right eye.

According to Edimund Revelian, program officer at Kwa Wazee, many of the women that the organization has assisted with witchcraft accusations and other problems have also needed cataract removal surgery.

"Most of them had cataracts. And normally when they go to the hospital, they are advised not to stay in a place with a lot of smoke, as this can affect their eyesight," he said.

A 2013 research paper found strong evidence to suggest that there is an association between solid household fuel use and cataracts in LMICs. Researchers concluded that "given the high burden associated with these conditions, the widespread use of solid fuels for cooking, and the plausibility of associations, appropriate investigations are needed."

A separate study that compared self-reported eye and respiratory symptoms among women who used wood as fuel with those who used natural gas in southern Pakistan also found that overall eye and respiratory symptoms were significantly associated with wood use in this setting.

The cost of household air pollution

A report from the World Bank estimated that 4 billion people — around 50% of the world's population — still lack access to clean, efficient, convenient, safe, reliable, and

affordable cooking energy. In sub-Saharan Africa, the rate of access to modern energy cooking services, or MECS, stands at only 10%.

Writing to Devex, a spokesperson for the World Bank said that “women bear a disproportionate share of the negative health risks from household air pollution, as well as the time poverty associated with traditional household cooking, leading to opportunity costs,” because in most lower-income countries, women like Chizimu have the primary responsibility for household cooking and rely on polluting stoves and fuels.

Though it is difficult to determine the direct cost of the negative effects of household air pollution on the eyes, the bank’s report estimated that failure to meet the clean cooking target under SDG 7 would cost the world \$2.4 trillion per year through the negative impacts for health, gender, and climate. The health impact alone was estimated to be \$1.4 trillion per year.

Finding solutions

To counter this, the World Bank spokesperson noted that there is a need to improve the overall cooking energy ecosystem by adopting several priority actions. These include creating high-profile coalitions to prioritize access to MECS in global and national arenas, ensuring that cooking energy is incorporated into national energy plans and development strategies, and dramatically scaling up financing.

“Progress toward universal access to MECS has been hindered by a lack of interventions and solutions that are fully responsive to the underlying needs of lower-income and rural households. In many countries, this situation is driven by a combination of higher up-front capital costs, low household awareness, and low availability of fuels, owing, in part, to underdeveloped infrastructure,” the spokesperson said.

In response to these challenges, SNV Tanzania has introduced an affordable solution to clean cooking. In 2013, the nonprofit development organization introduced affordable improved cooking stoves to the market through a project supported by the Energising Development program.

Hassan Bussiga, project manager at SNV Tanzania, said that through the project, training has been provided to over 100 people across 10 regions and 36 districts in Tanzania to produce improved cooking stoves known as matawi. Available in ceramic and metal versions, the stoves are dual fuel, able to use charcoal and firewood. Their prices range from roughly \$2 to \$12, depending on the size and material used, Bussiga said.

“They have been designed to ensure that they are using very little firewood and charcoal, and the rate of emission is also reduced significantly. ... We also encourage users to use dry firewood, as it produces less emissions,” he added.

Though Chizimu has not been able to purchase a clean cooking solution, she said she too has started to use dry firewood for her cooking, as she was advised that it produces less smoke and will cause less damage to her eyes.

TURKEY: Turkish women rage against sexism with topsy-turvy tweets

Ever since last week, Turkish women have been giving their male counterparts a taste of sexist remarks by switching sex in popular sayings or political statements.

By Nazlan Ertan

Al-Monitor (10.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2NieHhb> - An unprecedented flurry of reverse sexism raised its head in Turkey's lively Twittersphere last week. "I am a modern woman, so I help my husband with housework," said a tweet, whilst another declared, "The greatest gift a man can offer his wife is his virginity." Simply by switching the word "woman" with "man" and "wife" with "husband," Turkish women — and some men — of all walks of life mocked misogynist or chauvinistic expressions, idioms, maxims and particularly political statements that discriminate against women.

"Thousands of tweets under the hashtag #menshouldknowtheirplace were witty and impactful," Meltem Agduk, gender programme coordinator at the United Nations Population Fund in Turkey told Al-Monitor. "No wonder that some [conservative or chauvinistic] groups felt threatened by it and tried to counter it with another hashtag — #womenshouldknowtheirplace — or criticize it with media declarations. But these attempts have been futile; even after a week, the online campaign is still going strong."

The spontaneous campaign started June 3 with a single, punchy tweet, "My husband can work if he wants" — an allusion to an often heard saying by men who try to drive home the point that they "allow" their wives to work. A 2001 legal amendment gave married women in Turkey the right to work without seeking spousal consent. But traditions, mentality and a host of legal and structural obstacles — such as the absence of child care centers and gender pay gap — prevent many women from joining the workforce. Only 34.5% of women in Turkey work, which is nearly half of the European Union average (61.4 %).

Replies to the tweet by Ruq, who now has more than 95,000 followers, poured in, repeating all-too-familiar sentences with the roles reversed: "I would never allow my husband to work, his job is to take care of my kids" and "Since we both work, I lend a hand to my husband while he does the housework. I even load and unload the dishwasher or shop on the weekends. What's the big deal with housework anyway?"

But it was only after Gaye Su Akyol, a singer, activist and wit, started the hashtag #menshouldknowtheirplace that this initiative snowballed into a trending topic. Retweeting Ruq's tweet, Akyol commented, "Men should be chaste. They should not laugh out loud in public." This was a reference to a comment in 2014 by Bulent Arinc, one of the heavyweights of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) then and a notorious anti-feminist, who said that women should be chaste, act with modesty and "refrain from laughing out loud in public."

Within hours, many women's rights activists and Twitter users joined in creating a chronicle of headline-grabbing sexist statements by government officials or acts of violence against women. One said that a man wearing shorts on public transport is "asking to be harassed," which alluded to a nurse who was kicked for wearing shorts on a bus in Istanbul in 2016. "Why would a decent man be out on the streets in the early hours of the morning?" joined in a male tweeter, referring to some of the statements made when a 19-year-old was threatened with a knife and raped in Istanbul's posh Bagdat Caddesi four years ago.

Most of the political satire targeted AKP officials whose statements often border on chauvinistic and misogynist. Many users switched around President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's remarks that motherhood was the highest honor bestowed upon women and that women who rejected motherhood were "deficient." Others mocked the words of an ex-minister who said that family values were threatened if "men" did not know how to bake a good traditional borek.

Opposition politicians joined in the campaign. "We are going to put up men from each constituency [in key posts] so that men can start being actors in politics, not mere accessories," tweeted Canan Kaftancıoğlu, the Istanbul chair of the Republican People's Party (CHP). Some CHP municipalities started tweeting that they were considering the launch of "blue buses" so that men can commute without harassment, mocking the AKP initiative of women-only pink buses.

Ruq was surprised by her newly-found fame. "I posted a [similar] tweet last year but nothing happened then," she tweeted. Akyol explained that the campaign had snowballed because women have become tired of femicides, domestic violence and daily demonstrations of sexism. "We are tired of this nauseating system where the name of the murder suspect is disguised, but the morality, life and choices of the victim are questioned. ... It is 2020 and we want to do something about this."

"The initiative showed us plainly how sexism exists in the everyday life in word and deed," Agduk noted. "It compliments, motivates and encourages other — more formal and structured — gender equality campaigns that international organizations and private groups carry out in Turkey."

One of those groups — Koc — launched in 2017 a Manual for Gender Mainstreaming in Communications, proposing alternatives for sexist forms of speech.

"From a communicator's point of view, this was a brilliant campaign," agreed Zehra Gungor, a communications expert and an activist for women's entrepreneurship. "The tweets were spontaneous, intelligent and very, very funny." She told Al-Monitor that she had also joined with a tweet that read, "We support our male colleagues who want quotas for men in political parties."

Not everyone was amused. While most women's groups, such as Stop Femicides Association, applauded the campaign, Women and Democracy Association (KADEM), vice-chaired by the president's daughter Sumeyye Erdogan Bayraktar, lambasted it, saying it was against the "values of society." On June 9, Ismail Kilicaslan, a columnist of Yeni Safak, also blasted the initiative, saying what started "innocently" had turned into offending religion by paraphrasing certain words of the prophet. "This is a dark project," he wrote, comparing it to the attempted coup against the government on July 15, 2016.

A feisty Akyol retorted with a tweet saying she was surely on the right path if her tweets irked conservative and chauvinistic groups. Posting an image of herself on a sunbed, she said she was toasting "to bury bigots who are disturbed [even] by the 'f' of freedom and the 'w' of woman in the dusty pages of history."

UK: Britain, Equality and the EU: a 'Progress' Report

By Cecilia Jastrzemska

HRWF (30.01.2024) – On 26 January, the Young European Movement UK and European Parliamentary Liaison Office organized in London a roundtable discussion on the state of gender equality in Europe and gender-based violence. One of the speakers, Cecilia Jastrzemska, specifically addressed the issue of gender equality in the UK after the Brexit about which she had published a paper in 2023. We publish some excerpts of it.

Equality between women and men is an integral value of the European Union that is enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty, just as it is in the UK, under the Equalities Act. But, legislation and practicality are of course often two very different things, the glaring continued existence of the gender pay gap around the world being a prime example.

It is almost an automatic expectation that in Western society, the ideological home of democratic and egalitarian values, that the general direction is, albeit slowly, moving towards gender equality. Yet with a [British woman recently being sentenced](#) to 28 months in jail for purchasing abortion pills over the outdated UK legal limit, Code First Girls' study highlighting the fact that the [majority of women drop out of tech roles pre-35](#), the Fabian Society's [Gendered Impact of the Pandemic pamphlet](#) data demonstrating an undeniable gap that still has not been closed and shows no sign of being so, plus the [Un Biased Report](#) substantiating this on an economic front, one would be forgiven for asking why on earth so little has changed, and whether we would be doing better had we remained within the legislative walls of the European Union.

Equality in the EU

The last few years have admittedly been disastrous for gender equality on many fronts. The devastation from the pandemic wreaked havoc on efforts to redress inequality and exacerbated existing issues. Churchill once said "Never let a good crisis go to waste" and many leaders took a leaf out of his book, exploiting the chaos of Covid-19 to consolidate power and [divert funding from initiatives that supported women](#).

Not only this, but there have been several government-led pendulum swings in the other direction when it comes to equality in certain countries. The Polish government for example has repeatedly [threatened to follow EU membership applicant Turkey by withdrawing the country](#) from the International Convention of Istanbul, a major human rights treaty establishing comprehensive legal standards to ensure the elimination of violence against women. Not only this, but the illegitimate Polish Constitutional Tribunal's ruling has introduced a [de facto ban on abortion](#).

Meanwhile, Hungary has unfortunately paralleled its former border neighbour in its regression. After a decade of [democratic backsliding](#) and corruption, Prime Minister Viktor Orban was warned that his government had [activated the conditionality mechanism](#), which allows the EU to stop funding to a member state if it violates principles regarding the rule of law. In 2020, Orban's government blocked ratification of a regional treaty on violence against women, and in October 2022, it was [placed under the full monitoring procedure](#) by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). Recently, the United Nations High Commissioner has [drawn attention to](#) discriminatory statements made by governmental institutions, and lack of access to medical abortion, as well as a myriad of other issues.

Where Do Women Thrive Most?

Two questions remain then; with our performance grinding to a halt on many levels, are our European counterparts performing better as a whole, and how does their status compare to other regions of the world?

Generally speaking, progress is being made on equality in the European Union, it's just moving at a glacial pace. Data from the European Institute for Gender Equality's [Index of 2022](#) showed that the EU member state average score out of 100 was 68.6 points, only 5.5 higher than in 2010 and a mere 0.6 increase from the previous year.

Looking at the EU compared to its external counterparts, although progress is painfully slow, it is still better. [Research from the Robert Schuman Foundation](#) shows that although on average women earn 10.3% less than men in the European Union, in the OECD as a whole, the average is 12%. Though this is still far from parity, it is higher than in all other regions of the world. For example in Japan it is 22.1%, in China 13.1% and in the United States it is 23.9%. Political representation is also stronger, with Brazil, Japan, India, Russia and notably China (with zero women in the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau) well below the EU average. Female participation in parliaments, boards and other political bodies is also [higher in Europe than elsewhere](#), with 37.77% of the members of the European Parliament being women.

In leaving the EU, we had the legislative rug pulled out from under us. Powers were repatriated to Westminster, which has led to the disintegration of the EU safety net. Much of EU law strengthened women's standing in different areas and created clear recourse for action where discrimination persisted. For example, the Pregnant Worker's Directive supported women by prohibiting pregnancy-based discrimination, the Work-Life Balance Directive improved access to flexible work arrangements, the Agency Workers Directive ensured minimum pay, and the Parental Leave Directive ensured exactly that, as well as setting other minimum standards. Now, the EU Withdrawal Act allows Ministers to amend, repeal or modify EU legislation converted into domestic law, bypassing parliamentary scrutiny. This serves as a disturbing dilution of previous legal antidotes to discrimination. National courts can of course no longer refer matters to the European Courts of Justice, and women's interests groups have also rapidly [lost access to the policymaking sphere](#).

In short, we gave up a whole host of powerful protections for women's rights that took years to gain. Now, 3 years on from Brexit and with the pandemic having further decimated hard won progress, it is hardly surprising that Britain is [stagnating](#).

In her paper '[Gender Equality in Europe; a still imperfect model in the world](#)', Research Fellow Stephanie Buzmaniuk concluded that "The European Union remains the region of the world where women live best". It is clear that the EU has a comparative advantage over the rest of the world that we used to, and could have continued benefiting from.

Looking inwards, it has become clear that we as Brits would be far better off in the European Union when it comes to levelling the playing field. As Joyce Quin, Vice President of European Movement [recently said](#), "Politicians must openly stand up and acknowledge the negative impact that Brexit is having on Britain." Not only politicians, but citizens too. To do so requires both creating and maintaining a conversation around what we are missing and how we get it back. Despite having a solid set of values, the EU certainly isn't perfect-it hasn't even ratified the Istanbul Convention yet. But it's undeniably better to have a seat at the table of those who have it on the agenda than not.

In late August/early September, Young European Movement will be hosting an event chaired by Cecilia on exactly this; 'Britain, Equality and the EU' with a panel of international speakers examining the state of gender equality. Details to follow once finalised; we look forward to seeing you there.

(*) HRWF Representative in London, Dr Evgeniia Gidulianova (7872812@ukr.net), participated in the event.

Cecilia Jastrzemska is Head of Events and National Coordination for Young European Movement. She works as a Director in central UK Government and is also Career Development Officer for the National Executive Committee for thinktank the Fabian

Society and a Board Trustee for charity Volunteer Centre Sutton. She writes extensively on international affairs, women's rights, artificial intelligence and the environment for political publications and is an award winning public speaker.

UK: Special report: As men's sport clamours to restart, how women's sport is being abandoned

The latest on when rugby, netball, football and cricket will return in the UK.

By Fiona Tomas, Katie Whyatt & Molly McElwee

The Telegraph (29.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2XxR6yA> - Across the sporting landscape, men's sport is gearing up to resume, headlined by the return of the Premier League on June 17. Meanwhile, women's competitions are being abandoned by governing bodies and sponsors alike. In this special report, our correspondents assess the damage being caused, and ask whether it is too late to turn the tide.

Rugby: Women's game could be used for law trial

by Fiona Tomas

2020 has been a barren year for domestic women's rugby. With the Six Nations widely criticized – from cold showers for the Wales team, to no prize money or title sponsor for the women's competition – the game was struggling even before the pandemic hit.

When coronavirus took hold, all Premier 15s activity – namely group training – was suspended. On March 20, the Rugby Football Union later voided all rugby in England with the exception of the men's Gallagher Premiership. There was no mention of any efforts being explored to restart the Premier 15s in its press release.

Some club players such as Kate Alder, the Wasps Ladies captain, have not played rugby since late January – before the league paused for the Women's Six Nations. Five months later, and Alder does not know when she will be able to return to a team training environment.

"As the lockdown eases, we might be able to do small, skill based sessions, as and when we're allowed to, with three or four people two metres [apart]," she says. "But because the whole point of our sport is contact-based, we haven't got a clue."

Reducing the amount of scrummaging during a game and limiting numbers in a maul were among 10 optional law trials approved by World Rugby this week to help reduce the risk of coronavirus transmission in sport.

Given its growing profile and meagre crowd numbers, elite women's rugby is often lumped with the community game – where the trials are expected to be applied – and therefore the Premier 15s could be exposed to such changes on a greater level than top-flight men's rugby.

But with the RFU now searching for a new title sponsor – after crisp company Tyrrells decided against renewing its contract later this year – introducing such measures could devalue elite women's rugby as a product.

"In terms of making all these changes to allow us to play, you wonder at what cost," says Alder. "If you say, 'Right we're changing this because we want players to come back and play,' is it necessarily the best way forward? To change the nature of the game, I don't think it's going to be very beneficial or realistic."

That Premier 15s squads are being trimmed from 60 to 40 from next season is timely given the concentrated efforts to lower the transmission of the virus. For now, clubs are awaiting updates from the RFU on when group training can be resumed. "Like all organisations, we will be guided by government and medical advice and update on plans in due course," an RFU spokesperson said.

Netball: Coronavirus has halted surging momentum

by Fiona Tomas

If there is one sport set to lose the most momentum from having practically its entire season cancelled, it is netball. This time last year, the country was preparing to host a sell-out World Cup in Liverpool. In 2018, England claimed a historic Commonwealth title on Australia's Gold Coast which sent grassroots participation levels soaring.

Record crowds attended the opening weekend of the Superleague, England's domestic top-flight in February. After becoming the last competition to be wiped from the women's sport scene on Wednesday, there is a genuine fear such progress could be reversed.

Plans are being drawn up to stage a shortened version of the competition in autumn - providing there is no second wave of the virus. But nearly three months on since a ball was last thrown on March 14, netball is now staring at a blank canvas. Franchises are missing out on an entire season's worth of revenue streams. For a sport hardly awash with money, the season cancellation could decide the futures of some.

"This pandemic has highlighted more than ever how women's sport is underfunded," says Sam Bird, the head coach at Superleague franchise London Pulse. "We do not have the luxury of being able to provide tests for players, or control over our own premises to provide a safe working environment."

Return to sport guidance laid out by the government has also inadvertently exacerbated the divisions between elite amateurism and professionalism. It defines an elite athlete as 'an individual who derives a living from competing in a sport' and this criteria was a key factor in deciding the fate of the semi-professional Superleague, where full-time athletes pit themselves against self employed players and even students.

The emphasis on elitism means England internationals are likely to be the first to resume some form of team training this summer - but franchises such as London Pulse already have plans in motion. Staging small-sided netball in outdoor spaces and training at the Copper Box Arena are some of the scenarios the club is exploring.

"That might be a better short term solution, in terms of providing a safe, sanitised space for us," says Bird. "But somebody's got to open the place, turn the lights on, there are health and safety certificates. Everything that seems like a simple idea at the time, but you start drilling down into the detail and it becomes more of a challenge."

International football: Germany, US surge ahead

by Katie Whyatt

While women's football in England stalls, elsewhere other countries have charged ahead in recommencing the game. The Frauen Bundesliga will become the first major women's league in the world to restart after a postponement due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The German Football Association had first suspended play on March 13th, but, with the aid of a solidarity fund for testing funded by some of the country's richest men's clubs and a strict hygiene and testing protocol, it will resume with two games on Friday.

America's NWSL will host the NWSL Challenge Cup in the Salt Lake City area beginning on June 27: a month-long tournament featuring all nine teams will mark the return of professional team sports – men or women's – in the United States.

The league's rulings have been subject to state and local health mandates – some states have had to adhere to stringent 'stay at home' orders – but where allowed, players returned for individual workouts at team facilities on May 6 and to small group training of up to eight players this week. If five days of small group training is completed, full-team training can begin May 30.

The NWSL's player association was consulted heavily and has guaranteed accommodation for players with children during the tournament, including plans for both the parent and children's health and safety. All nine teams will be housed at two area hotels, with 300 players and 500 administrative staff members on hand.

The tournament was planned with the unanimous support of the league owners and the players' association, but there have been reports that several members of the USWNT will skip the tournament, not least because a month-long tournament featuring artificial pitches poses injury risks.

In Germany, too, there have been concerns about a risk of injury – many players will play eight games in five weeks after just a full week of training. Meanwhile the demand for teams to quarantine for seven days prior to the first game has meant that when third in the league Hoffenheim play second placed Bayern Munich, the Hoffenheim women's coach – who is also a teacher – will miss the first game.

A survey of elite women's football leagues across the world paints a more mixed picture. Across Europe, the top leagues have been cancelled, including France's Division 1 Feminine and Spain's Primera División de la Liga de Fútbol Femenino.

The French side Amiens reacted with fury when they were relegated by points per game, having only completed 75 per cent of their season, although the Spanish top league cancelled relegation. Italy's Women's Serie A is set to resume.

Domestic football: Triumphant WSL season has ended with a whimper
by Katie Whyatt

Elite women's football has not been played in England for more than 90 days. That could be extended to six months if the game cannot return before September – pending a decision on whether this season's Women's Champions League and the FA Cup can be concluded. Neither were mentioned in Monday's announcement to cancel the Women's Super League and Championship.

The last Women's Super League fixtures took place on February 23rd. The League Cup final followed on February 29th, and then England played their final game – in America for the SheBelieves Cup – on March 11th, while a smattering of Women's National League matches took place at the beginning of that month.

What had started as a landmark, triumphant, season for the game – with record domestic crowds in the modern era and a major sponsorship deal with Barclays – is now threatening to end with a whimper.

The new WSL season is provisionally scheduled to begin in September, but the Football Association knows that this is subject to change. Telegraph Sport understands that the governing body began reviewing earlier this week the scope of and potential for delays to a provisional September start.

They plan to consult with clubs, then the FA board, next week to finalise a start date for the 2020/21 season, but it will depend on the Women's Champions League. Uefa are understood to be considering an August and September tournament to finish this year's competition. An announcement around the Women's FA Cup will be included in that.

The original return date - September 27th - was set before the postponement of the Olympics, but other scenarios were repeatedly mooted during discussions around the WSL's return.

Although the majority of WSL clubs have endorsed the FA's decision to cancel the league, the feeling remains that the governing body and the Premier League could have done more to ensure the return of women's football. It is understood that the cost of coronavirus testing was beyond the budgets of most clubs - with Championship Lewes estimating the cost of finishing the remaining games to be just £3 million for all clubs.

It is dispiriting that the FA, nor the Premier League's richer clubs, were not able to organise a testing fund when no resources have been spared ensuring Project Restart goes without a hitch.

Ultimately, the sport's return date depends on how successfully the UK can ease itself out of lockdown and the impact of any subsequent waves of coronavirus. That the only women's team to have been disbanded due to the virus - AFC Fylde - has since about-turned and committed to the following season demonstrates the impact of reputational risk but does not by any means show that women's football is out of the woods. The worst could still be yet to come when it comes to clubs' finances.

Cricket: Teams are playing a waiting game

by Molly McElwee

"The one thing you can say about us is we're good at waiting," Stephen Fry's familiar voice narrates, in the England and Wales Cricket Board's emotive lockdown video titled "Together Through This Test".

But as England's men's team returned to the nets this month and ECB women's cricket director Clare Connor conceded that the men's international game had to take priority with £280million on the line, the women seem to have a longer waiting game ahead of them.

"Anyone in the women's game is pretty much very used to waiting," Yorkshire cricketer Katie Levick says. "Unfortunately that's just the way it is."

On Friday the ECB confirmed that England's women's team will return to training on June 22, and are working with the India and South Africa cricket governing bodies to try to salvage the planned series for this summer. Best case scenario the South Africa series (of four ODIs and two T20s) which England were set to host starting September 1, could still go ahead as scheduled.

However, that is the only definitive date in the women's calendar at present, and if it does go ahead it will still be exactly a year on from the Kia Super League's conclusion in 2019, the last time women's cricket was played in England.

Domestic cricket has been pushed back for men and women until at least August 1, but the women's side is arguably in more dire straits. The Hundred's cancellation saw invaluable visibility on terrestrial television dissipate for another year and rare domestic earnings fall to the wayside.

The ECB's £20m planned investment in the women's game for the next two years cannot be ring-fenced in the current circumstances either. Forty full-time domestic contracts planned to launch this season have now instead morphed into 24 retainers at lower income for players until the more permanent system can be put in place, unlikely before October.

New regions in domestic women's cricket, teams made up from groupings of counties, were confirmed this month, but there remains little indication as to what the 50-over tournament they will compete in will look like, if it will go ahead in September as has been suggested or how player selection will work.

Telegraph Sport understands the ECB have encouraged players to direct questions to their new regional centres, but Levick says players are confused about the entire situation: "The domestic side of things has been thoroughly forgotten. The [ECB correspondence to players] has very much been "we haven't forgotten about the domestic season but it's very much TBC".

"We didn't even have that [confirmed] pre-pandemic. I had girls texting me saying what on earth is the regional thing? With or without pandemic we had no information I'd say. What are we playing? Who's playing? How are squads getting picked? We just have no idea. All I've heard is rumour of an undercover tournament in September. I still think there's so many questions around it all."

Hockey: Major events cancelled, and no headline sponsor

by Molly McElwee

Four years on from Olympic gold and glory at Rio, British women's hockey was looking to boost the sport again on the biggest stage at Tokyo. But with the Games delayed for another 12 months, a longer wait for visibility of that scale is bad news for a sport that lacks publicity at the best of times, and at the moment seems to be struggling.

Last month long-time partner, international bank Investec, declined to renew its deal with England and Great Britain Hockey, meaning that after August the national teams and the domestic league will have no title sponsor. England Hockey told Telegraph Sport it was confident of finding new sponsorship and that, from a financial point of view, it was not a big a blow in the short-term, but the message it sends is worrying.

It is not all bad news though. On some level, the fact the domestic leagues had already ended, apart from the play-offs, when lockdown measures began in March, puts hockey in a better position than other sports.

Domestic pre-season training usually begins in August, with the season set to start in September and both Great Britain and Surbiton players Emily Defroand and Hannah Martin told Telegraph Sport they were confident this would go ahead as scheduled.

Also, the fact women and men compete on the same international stages and their non-professional domestic leagues run in tandem means that there is widely parity in the lockdown circumstances.

However, major moments for visibility in the game have been sidelined. In international hockey competition the Pro League, Great Britain's women's team had not yet played at home this year and were looking forward to May and June home fixtures, including double headers at the Stoop with an aim to boost the sport's profile.

Martin says there are hopes these could be rescheduled for the autumn, and though there not yet finalised plans in place she and Defroand say England Hockey have been good at keeping in touch with players during this limbo period.

Definitive time frames seem to be lacking from England Hockey though, who have yet to outline how the elite contact sport will return in a socially-distanced new world order, and players have not yet heard on what kind of new protocols will be in place when they do train.

One-on-one coaching is now permitted, but last week England Hockey said that the national teams would not yet be returning to the Bisham Abbey training centre. Martin says she expects centrally contracted players may be back at training in the next month, "potentially in small groups".

USA: 'The other half of my soul': Widows of Covid-19 bond over sudden loss

Men have died of the coronavirus in larger numbers than women, leaving untold thousands of spouses suddenly alone. Some have turned to bereavement groups on Facebook.

By Julie Bosman

The NY Times (31.12.2020) - <https://nyti.ms/39ancVX> - One Friday evening, Sandra McGowan-Watts, a 46-year-old doctor from suburban Chicago, opened her laptop, stifled her nerves and told strangers on a Zoom call what had happened to her husband, Steven.

"He died by himself," said Dr. McGowan-Watts, who joined the call after an invitation on a Facebook support group for widowed Black women. "Not being able to see him, being able to touch him, all of those things. The grief is kind of complicated."

The women listening understood instantly. They were all widows of Covid-19.

For nearly two hours that summer night, their stories tumbled out, tales of sickness and death, single parenting and unwanted solitude, harrowing phone calls and truncated goodbyes.

More than 340,000 people have died of the coronavirus in the United States. Men have died of the disease in larger numbers than women, a gender disparity that some researchers have suggested could be partly attributed to men's generally poorer health. That has left untold thousands of spouses suddenly widowed by the virus.

Women have witnessed the pandemic from a miserably close angle. They have been left behind with family responsibilities, financial burdens, worries about their children's trauma and their own crushing loss and guilt. Many nursed their partners at home until they were so ill they had to be hospitalized; there, they often died with little warning.

Coronavirus widows, as well as many widowers, are spread out across the country, young and old, in big cities in California and small towns in Utah.

In more than a dozen interviews, women told of feeling stunned by the swiftness of the experience, even months after their husbands' deaths.

"It's very traumatic because of the unexpectedness of it," said Jennifer Law, whose husband, Matthew, died of the coronavirus in Texas in November, years after serving in the Army in Iraq. "He made it back from two deployments, two separate, dangerous deployments. He came home and this is what killed him."

Some feel unacknowledged, struggling to manage the aftermath of their partners' deaths amid an unending health crisis.

"It was really difficult for me because I felt like, man, I'm all alone," said Pamela Addison, 37, a teacher in Waldwick, N.J. Her husband, Martin, a speech pathologist who worked in a hospital, died of the virus in April. "If Covid wasn't here, all of our husbands would still be here."

Ms. Addison eventually sought out other Covid-19 widows to talk to, and other women have managed to find each other by joining Facebook bereavement groups, which are also open to men. They have forged ties similar to those found among other clusters of women whose husbands died unexpectedly and prematurely, including military spouses or widows of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The women on the Zoom call in July who live in the Chicago area have since become friends who meet for dinner and check in daily with quick texts.

Widows of the coronavirus recounted a painful set of commonalities: the experience of frantically taking care of their husbands when they fell ill, worrying about when to take them to a hospital and feeling haunted by the images of their partners dying without loved ones beside them.

"The generation that I'm from, we took care of our husbands — that's how we were raised," said Mary Smith, of Pekin, Ill., who lost her 64-year-old husband, Mike, to the virus. "That was our job, to be their cheerleader. They're used to having that, and all of a sudden you're not there."

After her husband died, she scrolled through his phone and found the lonely pictures he had snapped from his hospital bed. His food, in a cardboard container. The oxygen machines. A selfie as he wore breathing equipment.

"It was so stark," Ms. Smith said. "He was in there by himself so much of the time."

Jennifer Kay Jensen, who lives in Delray Beach, Fla., has been tormented by the notion that her presence in the hospital — barred to prevent further transmission — could have helped her husband recover. Her husband, Peter, a 56-year-old real estate broker, died of the virus in August.

"The guilt, it eats me up every day," she said. "I think it could have made a difference, if I was there seeing him, to soothe him or scratch his arm or kiss his head."

In St. George, Utah, Donna Heintz has been marooned, physically and emotionally, since her 78-year-old husband, Fred, died in October. Her neighbor across the street calls her to check in, or waves if they are outside at the same moment. But the isolation of widowhood is raw and unending.

"I wake up in the morning and the first thing I do is try to get out of bed quietly so I don't wake him," she said, choking back sobs. "Then I look to see if he's there, and he's gone."

Her husband, an Army veteran and longtime police officer, was the cook in their house, preparing meals that they would share on TV trays in the living room, watching their favorite shows and making each other laugh. Now Ms. Heintz barely wants to eat a thing, and cannot shake the feeling that her husband is still there.

"Sometimes at night I look in the kitchen and wonder what he's fixing for supper," she said.

A report published in May by the Global Fund for Widows, a nonprofit organization based in New York, called the coronavirus a "widow-making machine," an outbreak that could create "unprecedented numbers of widows across the developing world."

By late December, at least 163,000 men had died from the virus in the United States, compared with at least 138,000 women, according to federal data.

Sarah S. Richardson, a historian at Harvard who directs its GenderSci Lab, said men have died of the coronavirus in greater numbers in part because of its disproportionate effect on Black men, and by a surge in deaths of men early in the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, she added, women were more likely to be widowed than men.

The Facebook group for Black women who have been widowed has seen a tragic influx of new members this year.

Sabra Robinson, its creator, became a widow in 2012 after her husband died of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Spurred by that experience, and her dissatisfaction in traditional grief support groups, she started her own, with a heavy focus on empowerment and encouragement for Black women.

"When Covid hit, oh my goodness, the group was receiving so many requests from widows who lost their husbands due to Covid," said Ms. Robinson, a project manager from Charlotte, N.C. "They are experiencing more complicated grief than I would say the average widow that posts in the group. How in the world can they heal as long as Covid is out there?"

For younger widows of Covid-19, the task of raising small children alone has been one of the most daunting tests of the pandemic.

After her husband died in April, Diana Ordonez sold her house in New Jersey to downsize and move closer to friends, family and their church. Ms. Ordonez described her husband, Juan, as a warm, funny and cheerful man who was "the other half of my soul."

Ms. Ordonez said she had been propelled forward by a desire to be a good example for their 5-year-old daughter, Mia, to show her that she should live fully, as Juan did.

"This whole experience is so depleting and so draining," Ms. Ordonez said. "You have to lead your kid by example. You want them to be happy, and you're showing them how to behave."

Some women's grief has been laced with anger.

Mara Vaughan, of Prosper, Texas, lost her husband, Bryan, to the coronavirus in April, after he quite likely contracted it on a business trip. Ms. Vaughan, who has three

children, has connected with other widows online and read about their struggles, financial and emotional.

She pointed to President Trump and his downplaying of the coronavirus crisis, especially early on, when her husband became sick. It is difficult to see people in her community still shunning masks and ignoring advice on safety and social distancing.

"Imagine the pandemic and losing someone to it and then doing it alone," Ms. Vaughan said. "I will never have peace and closure on the death of my husband. It should never have happened."

USA: 'I won't be the last': Kamala Harris, first woman elected US vice-president, accepts place in history

With victory speech, California senator brings tears to eyes of crowd in Delaware.

By Lauren Gambino

The Guardian (08.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2Ie65cw> - Kamala Harris accepted her place in history on Saturday night with a speech honoring the women who she said "paved the way for this moment tonight", when the daughter of Jamaican and Indian immigrants would stand before the nation as the vice-president-elect of the United States.

With her ascension to the nation's second highest office, Harris, 56, will become the first woman and the first woman of color to be elected vice-president, a reality that shaped her speech and brought tears to the eyes of many women and girls watching from the hoods of their cars that had gathered in the parking lot of a convention center in Wilmington, Delaware.

Wearing an all-white pantsuit, in an apparent tribute to the suffragists who fought for a woman's right to vote, Harris smiled, exultant, as she waved from the podium waiting for the blare of car horns and cheers to subside. Joe Biden, the president-elect, would speak next. But this was a moment all her own.

She began her remarks with a tribute to the legacy of the late congressman and civil rights activist John Lewis.

"Protecting our democracy takes struggle," Harris said, speaking from a stage outside the Chase Center on the Riverfront in Wilmington. "It takes sacrifice. But there is joy in it. And there is progress. Because we, the people, have the power to build a better future."

With Harris poised to become the highest-ranking woman in the history of American government, this milestone marks the extraordinary arc of a political career that has broken racial and gender barriers at nearly every turn. As a prosecutor, she rose to become the first Black female attorney general of California. When she was elected to the Senate in 2016, she became only the second Black woman in history to serve in the chamber.

In her remarks, Harris paid tribute to the women across the country – and throughout history – who made this moment possible.

"I reflect on their struggle, their determination and the strength of their vision, to see what can be, unburdened by what has been," she said. "I stand on their shoulders."

She specifically honored the contributions of Black women to the struggle for suffrage, equality and civil rights – leaders who are “too often overlooked, but so often prove that they are the backbone of our democracy”.

As a candidate for president, Harris spoke often of her childhood spent attending civil rights marches with her parents, who were students at the University of California, Berkeley. When protests erupted in the aftermath of the police killing of George Floyd this summer, Harris joined activists in the streets to demand an end to police brutality and racial injustice.

As Biden searched for a running mate, pressure built to choose a Black woman in recognition not only of the role they played in salvaging his presidential campaign – which Biden acknowledged in his remarks on Saturday night – but of their significance to the party as a whole. Yet a narrative began to form that Harris was a somewhat conventional choice, a senator and one-time Democratic rival who brought generational, ideological and racial balance to the Democratic ticket.

But Harris disagreed emphatically, saying that her presence on the stage was a testament to “Joe’s character – that he had the audacity to break one of the most substantial barriers that exists in our country and select a woman as his vice-president”.

Yet Harris’s presence on the ticket was not only a reflection of the nation’s demographic future but a repudiation of a president who relentlessly scapegoated immigrants and repeatedly attacked women and people of color.

In a moment of reflection, Harris invoked her mother, Shyamala Gopalan Harris, who left her home in India for California in 1958, at the age of 19.

“Maybe she didn’t quite imagine this moment,” Harris said. “But she believed so deeply in an America where a moment like this is possible.”

In interviews and on the campaign trail, Harris often quoted her mother, sharing the advice and admonitions of a woman she describes as diminutive in stature but powerful in her presence.

On Saturday, Harris made a promise to the country.

“While I may be the first woman in this office,” Harris vowed, “I will not be the last, because every little girl watching tonight sees that this is a country of possibilities.”

USA: Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Supreme Court justice and legal pioneer for gender equality, dies at 87

By Robert Barnes & Michael A. Fletcher

The Washington Post (19.09.2020) - <https://wapo.st/32SSAGz> - Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the second woman to serve on the high court and a legal pioneer for gender equality whose fierce opinions as a justice made her a hero to the left, died Sept. 18 at her home in Washington. She was 87.

The death was announced in a statement by the U.S. Supreme Court. She had recently been treated for pancreatic cancer.

Born in Depression-era Brooklyn, Justice Ginsburg excelled academically and went to the top of her law school class at a time when women were still called upon to justify taking a man's place. She earned a reputation as the legal embodiment of the women's liberation movement and as a widely admired role model for generations of female lawyers.

Working in the 1970s with the American Civil Liberties Union, Justice Ginsburg successfully argued a series of cases before the high court that strategically chipped away at the legal wall of gender discrimination, eventually causing it to topple. Later, as a member of the court's liberal bloc, she was a reliable vote to enhance the rights of women, protect affirmative action and minority voting rights and defend a woman's right to choose an abortion.

On the court, she became an iconic figure to a new wave of young feminists, and her regal image as the "Notorious RBG" graced T-shirts and coffee mugs. She was delighted by the attention, although she said her law clerks had to explain that the moniker referred to a deceased rapper, the Notorious B.I.G. She also was the subject of a popular film documentary, "RBG" (2018).

When she was named one of Time magazine's 100 most influential people in 2015, her colleague and improbable close friend, conservative Justice Antonin Scalia, wrote about her dual roles as crusader and judge. "Ruth Bader Ginsburg has had two distinguished legal careers, either one of which would alone entitle her to be one of Time's 100," wrote Scalia, who died in 2016.

After Scalia's death, the Senate took no action to confirm President Barack Obama's nominee to the court, U.S. Appeals Court Judge Merrick Garland. President Trump, who took office in 2017, has nominated two new justices to the court, Neil M. Gorsuch and Brett M. Kavanaugh, the latter succeeding Justice Anthony M. Kennedy.

NPR reported that Justice Ginsburg, in a statement dictated to her granddaughter in recent days, said, "My most fervent wish is that I will not be replaced until a new president is installed."

A landmark moment for Justice Ginsburg came in 2011, when the court for the first time opened its term with three female justices. Justice Ginsburg said in an interview with The Washington Post that it would "change the public perception of where women are in the justice system. When the schoolchildren file in and out of the court and they look up and they see three women, then that will seem natural and proper — just how it is."

Her outspoken feminism played a role in Justice Ginsburg's success. President Bill Clinton acknowledged that in 1993 when he nominated her to replace retiring Justice Byron White. At the time, she was a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit.

"Many admirers of her work say that she is to the women's movement what former Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall was to the movement for the rights of African Americans," Clinton said in Rose Garden ceremony. "I can think of no greater compliment to bestow on an American lawyer."

(Justice Ginsburg herself usually demurred when the comparison was made, saying that Marshall literally risked his life defending Black clients in the segregated South and that her legal work required no such sacrifice.)

On the court, Justice Ginsburg's most notable rulings and dissents advanced feminist causes.

In 1996, she authored a groundbreaking decision ordering the Virginia Military Institute to admit women, ending a 157-year tradition of all-male education at the state-funded school.

While Virginia “serves the state’s sons, it makes no provision whatever for her daughters. That is not equal protection,” Justice Ginsburg wrote in *United States v. Virginia*. The 7-to-1 decision — her friend, Scalia, was the dissenter — was the capstone of the legal battle for gender equality, she said later.

“I regard the VMI case as the culmination of the 1970s endeavor to open doors so that women could aspire and achieve without artificial constraints,” Justice Ginsburg said after the decision.

Later in her career, discrimination against women was the theme of several forceful dissents Justice Ginsburg read from the bench, a sparingly used bit of theater that justices employ to emphasize deeply held disagreements with a majority opinion.

Among them was a protest of the court’s decision to uphold a federal ban on so-called partial-birth abortions. “The court deprives women of the right to make an autonomous choice, even at the expense of their safety,” Justice Ginsburg wrote. “This way of thinking reflects ancient notions about women’s place in the family and under the Constitution — ideas that have long since been discredited.”

In another, she objected to a ruling that said workers may not sue their employers over unequal pay caused by discrimination alleged to have begun years earlier. That case had been filed by Lilly Ledbetter, the lone female supervisor at a tire plant in Gadsden, Ala., who sued after determining she was paid less than male co-workers.

In an interview with *The Post* in 2010, Justice Ginsburg said the Ledbetter case struck a personal chord.

“Every woman of my age had a Lilly Ledbetter story,” she said. “And so we knew that the notion that a woman who is in a nontraditional job is going to complain the first time she thinks she is being discriminated against — the one thing she doesn’t want to do is rock the boat, to become known as a complainer.”

She called upon Congress to take action, and once Democrats were in control, it did. Obama signed the law relaxing the deadlines for filing suits.

If the law is often complex, her view of equality was simple, she once said.

“It has always been that girls should have the same opportunity to dream, to aspire and achieve — to do whatever their God-given talents enable them to do — as boys,” Justice Ginsburg said in a 2015 conversation at the American Constitution Society. “There should be no place where there isn’t a welcome mat for women. . . . That’s what it’s all about: Women and men, working together, should help make the society a better place than it is now.”

Click [here](#) to continue reading.

USA: A century after women gained the right to vote, majority of Americans see work to do on gender equality

About three-in-ten men say women’s gains have come at the expense of men.

By Juliana Menasce Horowitz & Ruth Igielnik

Pew Research Center (07.07.2020) - <https://pewrsr.ch/2ZNAumx> - A hundred years after the 19th Amendment was ratified, about half of Americans say granting women the right to vote has been the most important milestone in advancing the position of women in the country. Still, a majority of U.S. adults say the country hasn't gone far enough when it comes to giving women equal rights with men, even as a large share thinks there has been progress in the last decade, according to a new Pew Research Center survey.

Among those who think the country still has work to do in achieving gender equality, 77% point to sexual harassment as a major obstacle to women having equal rights with men. Fewer, but still majorities, point to women not having the same legal rights as men (67%), different societal expectations for men and women (66%) and not enough women in positions of power (64%) as major obstacles to gender equality. Women are more likely than men to see each of these as a major obstacle.

Many of those who say it is important for men and women to have equal rights point to aspects of the workplace when asked about what gender equality would look like. Fully 45% volunteer that a society where women have equal rights with men would include equal pay. An additional 19% say there would be no discrimination in hiring, promotion or educational opportunities. About one-in-ten say women would be more equally represented in business or political leadership.

In terms of the groups and institutions that have done the most to advance the rights of women in the U.S., 70% say the feminist movement has done at least a fair amount in this regard. The Democratic Party is viewed as having contributed more to the cause of women's rights than the Republican Party: 59% say the Democratic Party has done at least a fair amount to advance women's rights, while 37% say the same about the GOP. About three-in-ten (29%) say President Donald Trump has done at least a fair amount to advance women's rights, while 69% say Trump has not done much or has done nothing at all. These views vary considerably by party, with Republicans and Republican leaners at least five times as likely as Democrats and those who lean Democratic to say the GOP and Trump have done at least a fair amount and Democrats far more likely than Republicans to say the same about the Democratic Party.

Views of the role the feminist movement has played in advancing gender equality are positive overall, though fewer than half of women say the movement has been beneficial to them personally. About four-in-ten (41%) say feminism has helped them at least a little, while half say it has neither helped nor hurt them. Relatively few (7%) say feminism has hurt them personally. Democratic women, those with a bachelor's degree or more education and women younger than 50 are among the most likely to say they've benefitted personally from feminism.

Views about how much progress the country has made on gender equality differ widely along partisan lines. About three-quarters of Democrats (76%) say the country hasn't gone far enough when it comes to giving women equal rights with men, while 19% say it's been about right and 4% say the country has gone too far. Among Republicans, a third say the country hasn't made enough progress, while 48% say it's been about right and 17% say the country has gone too far in giving women equal rights with men.

There is also a gender gap in these views, with 64% of women – compared with 49% of men – saying the country hasn't gone far enough in giving women equal rights with men. Democratic and Republican women are about ten percentage points more likely than their male counterparts to say this (82% of Democratic women vs. 70% of Democratic men and 38% of Republican women vs. 28% of Republican men).

The nationally representative survey of 3,143 U.S. adults was conducted online from March 18-April 1, 2020.¹

Click [here](#) for other key findings and the full report.

USA: Coronavirus recession will hit women harder, experts warn

Women of colour in particular could suffer disproportionately from virus-fuelled economic downturn.

By Kaelyn Forde

Al Jazeera (16.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3br5vkV> - Crystal Crawford, 34, loves her job as a social worker at a nonprofit private school for children who have experienced homelessness. But the pay has never been enough to live on in downtown Atlanta, Georgia, so Crawford has always nannied for up to 10 families at a time, taking care of kids after school, on parents' date nights, during school vacations and more.

"A lot of hourly workers look like me, and unfortunately, when they get rid of those jobs, people are having to seek resources from the government or from food pantries," Crawford told Al Jazeera. "People who thought they had it all together - right now, we're struggling to maintain our households."

Crawford also runs a small business that pairs families with nannies. The money she earned caring for children herself used to bring in an extra \$900 to \$1,200 per month, she said, in addition to the \$45,000 she makes per year as a social worker.

But the coronavirus pandemic has caused her childcare work to dry up completely, and her social worker's salary is not enough to cover almost \$1,400 in rent, plus utilities and food, per month. She is also faced with the uncertainty of when her school will reopen, and whether a full-time social worker will be part of its distance learning plan if kids cannot go back to their classrooms.

"The cost of living is super high in Atlanta, and to just have one-third of your salary gone on the drop of a dime, that's a hard hit for someone," she explained. "Every day, we're just hoping to keep our doors open, hoping that the kids get to go back to school in August. Everything is just kind of up in the air right now."

Crawford is far from alone. Women are a huge part of the workforce responding to the coronavirus pandemic, but on average, they are paid less than men and poised to lose more from the continuing economic fallout, according to an analysis by the World Economic Forum.

Part of it has to do with the jobs women fill, but the gender pay gap and the large burden of unpaid childcare and housework also play a role, said Caitlyn Collins, an assistant professor of sociology at Washington University in St Louis.

"Women's disproportionate burden for caregiving hinders their ability to participate fully in the paid labour force. This is true in the best of times, and especially true, and dire, in times of economic crisis," Collins told Al Jazeera.

"Women also hold a disproportionate share of jobs in the care and service sectors - especially women of colour - so they're at the front lines and in the trenches of the coronavirus pandemic," she added.

Women comprise 70 percent of health and social sector workers in 104 countries, according to a 2019 report from the World Health Organization, and contribute \$3 trillion per year to global health, half of which is in the form of unpaid care work.

But on average, women healthcare workers earn 28 percent less than men and are less likely to be employed full-time, according to the WHO. Both of those factors make women more likely to feel the effects of the coronavirus recession more acutely.

'Well-worn path of inequality'

Of course, it is not just healthcare workers who are on the front lines of the crisis - grocery store workers, domestic workers, delivery people and transit workers are all still working outside their homes, and many are women and people of colour, said Elise Gould, a senior economist at the Economic Policy Institute, a progressive-leaning US think tank.

"Some of the front line workers are going to be disproportionately Black and brown people - people working in grocery stores, transportation, public transit, lots of different sectors - and they're continuing to work," Gould told Al Jazeera. "At the same time, we know that Hispanic workers and Black workers are much less likely to be able to telework, so that tells you about the kind of jobs that they have and their ability to weather this storm from a health security standpoint or a financial security standpoint."

And while unemployment has soared across the United States in every demographic, "initial data suggests that women are more likely to lose their job at this time, and that's somewhat due to the types of jobs that are being lost," which include jobs in the service and care sectors, Gould said.

In some of the states hardest hit by the coronavirus - including New York, New Jersey, Oregon, Virginia and Minnesota - unemployment rates for women surged between 13 and 35 points above average figures during the last two weeks of March, according to data obtained by journalists at the nonprofit Fuller Project.

That is a contrast to the 2008 financial crisis, which first impacted industries that mostly employed men, said Gould.

"The Great Recession, to a large extent, was driven by initial losses in manufacturing and construction, which are dominated by men," she said. "These sectors that are being hit first and hardest now are not the typical sectors. So it's not just that you might have women being hit, it's that you're having more low-wage workers being hit, and that's an important distinction."

Among those low-wage workers are the US's 2.2 million domestic workers, who care for children and the elderly, cook, clean and perform a variety of other household tasks. Some 91 percent of them are women, according to an analysis by the Economic Policy Institute, and many are women of colour and immigrants.

Since domestic workers have never had a social safety net - including paid time off, living wages and health insurance - that makes them even more vulnerable in a crisis, said Haeyoung Yoon, the senior director for immigration policy at the nonprofit, National Domestic Workers Alliance.

"The coronavirus pandemic is travelling the well-worn path of inequality, and we are already seeing that low-wage workers, and women low-wage workers in particular, are hit the hardest," Yoon told Al Jazeera. "Poverty and gender inequality will be a decisive factor in how this virus will spread and its long-term effects."

The coronavirus has already taken a major short-term toll. A recent survey by the National Domestic Workers Alliance found 72 percent of domestic workers had no work for the week beginning April 6, a 9 percent increase from the previous week.

And while the median wage for domestic workers is just \$10.21 per hour, the same survey found that 77 percent of domestic workers are their family's primary breadwinners. The coronavirus crisis has the potential to thrust entire households into poverty.

"Many domestic workers earn poverty wages, work with no job security, and no safety net," Yoon said. "Domestic workers cannot telework from home. They must still go to work. But, for nannies and house cleaners, they are experiencing sudden and devastating unemployment or underemployment."

Working more - for free

Women also do the lion's share of unpaid care work at home, including taking care of children and the elderly, cooking meals and cleaning.

Globally, women perform 76.2 percent of unpaid care work, more than three times as much as men, a 2018 report by the International Labour Organization found, and "unpaid care work is the main barrier preventing women from getting into, remaining and progressing in the labour force".

Even in families that are used to dividing up tasks more equitably, if a father earns more at his job, a mother might be expected to spend more time caring for or homeschooling kids during the pandemic.

Women working full-time in the US earn roughly 82 cents to every dollar a man earns, according to the US Census Bureau. That gender pay gap becomes even more pronounced for women of colour, with Black women earning only 62 cents on average compared to every dollar a white, non-Hispanic man earns, and Hispanic women earning only 54 cents.

"Because the gender wage gap exists, it could be the case that if somebody has to cut their hours to take care of these things, then it's more likely going to be the woman," Gould said.

Uncertain future

All of it makes for an uncertain economic future for many women.

Crawford said she has no childcare work lined up, and only two of her 10 regular clients have reached out to ask her how she is faring in the crisis. None of them have continued to pay her, even though she had standing appointments with many of them.

But the crisis might mean going back to being a full-time nanny, even though Crawford has a master's degree.

"We don't know when the kids are going to go back to school, so we can't really plan for August right now. It's unpredictable because we might be doing distance learning until

God knows when," Crawford said. "I'm thankful that if this all tumbles down and I'm no longer able to work at the school, that I'm able to get a full-time nanny gig once the pandemic is over."

USA: U.S. soccer says women don't deserve equal pay because they have less skill

By Kim Elsesser

Forbes (11.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2xo3oyX> - The United States Soccer Federation argued in a court filing that the gender discrimination lawsuit lodged by the U.S. women's national team (USWNT) does not have legal standing because, among other reasons, men have more ability, strength and speed.

Thirty-eight members of the women's national team sued the U.S. Soccer Federation last March, accusing the federation of failing to promote gender equality. The women have asked for \$67 million, while U.S. Soccer is asking for the suit to be dismissed.

The federation filed its latest motion on Monday, and one of their arguments is the different abilities and skills held by male and female soccer players. The court filing argues, "it's not a sexist stereotype to recognize the different levels of speed and strength required for the two jobs," referring to the athletes on the men's and women's teams. They cite a study indicating a 10-12% performance gap between elite male and female athletes. The federation also refers to the testimony from two-time Olympic gold-medal winner, Carli Lloyd, stating, "As Plaintiff Carli Lloyd's testimony admits, the WNT could not compete successfully against the senior men's national teams because competing against 16- or 17-year old boys 'is about as old as [the WNT] can go.'"

"The point is that the job of MNT player (competing against senior men's national teams) requires a higher level of skill, based on speed and strength, than does the job of WNT player (competing against senior women's national teams)," the filing states. Men's teams, they argue, face tougher competition as well.

There is no argument that men are stronger than women. It's a well-documented biological difference. It's why we have separate teams for men and women.

Here's what U.S. Soccer doesn't understand. The selection of speed and strength as the criteria for pay is biased, and here's why.

Imagine a world where women's sports dominated for hundreds of years. Only female athletes are sports heroes, and only women's sports are televised. Then men begin playing sports at a professional level. Would we still use strength and speed to define ability in a sport? No, we'd likely say the men's game is too physical and lacks the finesse, intelligent playmaking and teamwork of the women's game. If we had to rationalize paying men less, we might further cite studies indicating men lack the flexibility of women.

We value strength and speed, because we are accustomed to strength and speed from watching years of men's sports. However, these are clearly not the most important skills for succeeding at the national level. Recall, the USWNT won the World Cup last summer, while the country's men failed to qualify for the 2018 World Cup.

The USWNT believes that U.S. Soccer's arguments actually illustrate the gender discrimination that caused the women to file the lawsuit in the first place. "This ridiculous

'argument' belongs in the Paleolithic Era. It sounds as if it has been made by a caveman," Molly Levinson, spokeswoman for the U.S. women, said in response to the filing.

The outcome of this lawsuit will send a message to aspiring female athletes as to whether women's skills will be recognized and appreciated or whether the biological differences between men and women will result in women taking a back seat to the men—even when representing our country. On March 30, the judge will rule on whether the case will proceed.

WORLD: Analysis of feminists' prejudice against religious minority women

By Mariz Tadros

[IPS UN Bureau](#) (17.02.2023) - Since researching the experiences of gender discrimination against women in poverty who belong to religious minorities, many fellow feminists have turned their back on me.

The inherent assumption among some of my feminist critics is that by defending women who are targeted on account of their religious affiliation, I am defending their religions. Yet defending the rights of a Hindu woman in Pakistan or Muslim woman in India do not constitute defending Hinduism or Islam.

Defending a woman's right not to be discriminated against because of her identity and challenging religious bigotry both go hand in hand. We need to [challenge all political projects that seek to homogenize people](#) while simultaneously defending women, minorities, artists and others whose positioning accentuates their experiences of inequality.

Feminist reluctance to address injustices experienced by women who belong to religious minorities is also driven by concern that we end up empowering religious movements whose ethos is against [women's equality](#).

Again, we need to distinguish between women who are the targets of hate because they do not share the same faith as the majority, and anti-feminist movements who often are from the majority. We need to show solidarity with the former while challenging the latter.

Well-meaning progressive, feminists based in the West are [reluctant to openly advocate for the rights of religious minority women living in Muslim majority contexts](#) because of legitimate concerns that this would feed into orientalist (racist) representations of radical militant Islamist groups or by intolerant sections of society.

Yet can we be inadvertently reproduce a colonialist mindset when we decide to omit the experiences of minority women out of fear of misappropriation in the west?

Why should women who have experienced genocide be denied transnational feminist solidarities because it would be more progressive to focus on the Muslims who were against the genocide.

Research undertaken by the [Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development](#), shows that in countries including Iraq, Pakistan and Nigeria, experiences for women are made worse where their experiences of gender inequality, religious marginality and socio-economic exclusion intersect.

For example, women belonging to religious minorities become easy targets of vilification and assault because of the visible manifestation of difference through what they wear. [Yazidi, Sabeen or Christian women are exposed to harassment in disproportionate levels in Iraq](#) because they do not cover their hair while [in Pakistan, Hindu women dressed in Sari are subject to ridicule and targeting because their middle bodies are said to be 'exposed'](#).

Even if you belong to the majority religion, and you cover up more than the others, this still means exposure to harassment for being seen to practice the religion differently, as experienced by [Ahmediyya women in Pakistan](#) and the Izala Sufi women in Nigeria.

Women from religious minorities can also be at significant risk of sexual assault. While all women in patriarchal societies are exposed to sexual harassment independently of their religious affiliation, women affiliated to religiously marginalized communities are targeted because of the circulation of stereotypes that they are more available or 'fair game' or that men are not obligated to respect them the same respect as those from the majority religion.

While all women living in poverty suffer the impact of gender, caste and socio-economic exclusion combined, the experiences of discrimination become more acute and severe when shaped by ideological prejudice.

In [our research in the aftermath of covid](#), Muslim women spoke about being denied health care because of the scapegoating of Muslims for the spread of the pandemic, while in Iraq Yazidi women spoke of how despicable stereotypes of Yazidi women not washing meant doctors denied them treatment.

The feminist movement cannot continue to represent itself as committed to inclusivity through intersectionality (the recognition of and redress to- interface of gender, race, class, ableism and so forth in shaping and influencing power dynamics) while turning its back on women who come from a religious minority background where their rights are denied.

A review by doctoral researcher Amy Quinn-Graham of UN Women's website and publications related to intersectionality and/or 'minorities' from 2014 – 2019, showed that compared to indigenous women, migrant women, women with disabilities, women and girls living in rural localities, older women, and women and girls of African descent, all of which were accounted for in the [UN's Commission on the Status of Women agreed conclusions from 2017 onwards, concerns for the vulnerabilities facing "ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities"](#) were raised only once and for the first time in 2019, by the EU.

Certainly, there are feminist movements, scholars and those engaged in policymaking who recognize and seek redress for discrimination on grounds of religion experienced by socio-economically excluded women, but it seems they are the exception, rather than the norm.

It is not too late for us to be inclusive, and this International Women's Day we should recognize and show solidarity with women who belong to religious minorities living on the margins. We just have to start by not making excuses for their omission from our "intersectional lens".

[Professor Mariz Tadros is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies; a professor of politics and development and an IDS Research Fellow specialising in the politics and human development of the Middle East. Areas of specialisation include democratisation, Islamist politics, gender, sectarianism, human security and religion and development. Prof Tadros has convened the \[Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development \\(CREID\\)\]\(#\) since November 2018.](#)

WORLD: 'War on Women' needs forceful response, not glib statements

By Shada Islam

EU Observer (06.07.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3o9l2Oa> - Across the world, women's rights are under assault. This global war on women demands urgent international attention — and a forceful collective response.

Feel-good tick box references to gender equality of the kind made in last week's long-winded and largely unreadable official G7 and Nato statements are not enough.

Twenty-five years after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, not a single UN member has achieved gender equality.

Discrimination based on gender is happening in democracies and autocracies, in secular societies and religious ones, in rich and poor nations.

Orientalist and Islamophobic tropes notwithstanding, it is not just a problem "over there" in the Global South and in Muslim majority states. It is also a blight on the face of too many Western democracies.

The US Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v Wade, the 1973 landmark case protecting women's right to abortion, is a case in point.

And because what happens in America does not stay in America, there are fears the ruling is likely to embolden anti-abortion movements worldwide, including in Europe.

Some modest headway in recognising the unrelenting tide of discrimination and violence facing women worldwide was made at last week's largely self-congratulatory and mostly irrelevant G7 talk fest.

The group's mention of the many challenges and structural barriers facing women and the call for a gender-equal global economic recovery are a "step in the right direction", says the Gender and Development Network.

The G7 did commit to ensuring women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.

But meeting only days after the US Supreme Court decision, neither US president Joe Biden nor any of the other six leaders — joined by the only woman participant, EU Commission president Ursula Von der Leyen — mentioned the right to abortion.

Even the tough-talking hard security-wired Nato summit, which had 11 women leaders in attendance, managed only a passing reference to the UN's under-implemented and under-funded Women, Peace and Security agenda and the Alliance's work to "incorporate gender perspectives across the organisation".

Let's be generous and say these are good beginnings.

But let's also be honest and say this is cursory, complacent lip service.

The onus is now on Indonesia as the current G20 chair to make sure that gender equality really gets the priority attention it deserves at the summit in Bali in November.

The unnoticed 'care economy'

That means backing up noble intentions with real action on funding and investment in the care economy, a commitment to ensure women's reproductive health and making sure that women do not bear the brunt of the looming global economic slowdown.

Escalating levels of global inequality are eroding fragile but hard-won gains on gender inequality and it is women — particularly those who face multiple and escalating forms of intersectionality — who have been hit hardest.

Even today, the pandemic continues to impact women and girls disproportionately and this will remain the case amid looming food insecurity, increased energy prices and high levels of inflation.

Russia's war in Ukraine means that Ukrainian women have now joined the ranks of millions more who have suffered the unrelenting human costs of armed conflict from Syria to Yemen and Afghanistan and far beyond.

Sexual violence as a tactic of war, terrorism and political repression is on the rise, warns UN Women.

Afghan women and girls risk facing an even darker future unless there is a "more concerted international effort" to push the Taliban to respect women's rights.

To be effective, however, those putting the pressure on the Taliban must put their own houses in order.

Which brings us back to the damaging global fall-out of the US Supreme Court decision including concerns that it will embolden anti-abortion movements elsewhere.

Fearing just that, a group of MEPs has asked that anti-abortion lobbyists be banned from the European Parliament.

Metsola from Malta — where all abortion is illegal

European Parliament president Roberta Metsola, who is from Malta, is believed to have an anti-abortion voting track record and Malta is the only EU country where abortion is not allowed under any circumstances.

Poland's government has adopted a near-total ban on abortion with limited exceptions in the cases of rape, incest, or danger to the mother's life.

And there is the unhappy fact that EU members Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia have yet to ratify the Istanbul Convention, the first legally-binding international instrument on preventing and combating violence against women and girls at the international level.

The Polish government may withdraw from the agreement and despite widespread public protests and legal pushbacks, Turkey's Council of State recently ruled to uphold president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's decision to take Turkey out of the convention.

In contrast, Ukraine has ratified the agreement as part of its efforts to meet EU membership criteria.

There is no denying that advances in women's rights are being made by governments, international organisations, businesses and civil society actors.

But as recent events illustrate, there is much hard work ahead.

Ending centuries of discrimination, deep-rooted patriarchy and misogyny as well religious extremism and far-right populism which fuel the war on women requires counter-actions on multiple fronts.

Glib references and occasional mentions of gender equality in speeches and in long, rambling documents are not enough.

WORLD: U.N. : Gender Parity in UN's Treaty Bodies: Challenges and Solutions

By Judge Aruna Devi Narain and Ms. Marcia Vaune Jocelyn Kran O.C.

Diplomat Magazine (03.04.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3v4VN2r> - Women have a right to participate in public and political life and the work of international organizations under the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This right extends to [membership in all UN bodies](#), including the 10 [treaty bodies](#) that are meant to help countries protect international human-rights obligations. Although the first committee was set up in 1977, gender equality has not been achieved in the membership of most of them.

These bodies monitor a country's compliance with the [UN human-rights treaties](#) that collectively cover civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights; the rights of women, people with disabilities, migrant workers and children; and the right to freedom from torture, disappearance and discrimination. The committees function separately from the Human Rights Council, and committee members are independent experts rather than national officials. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) acts as the secretariat for the committees, providing the staff that is needed to organize and support committee meetings, most of which are held in Geneva.

The committees establish frameworks for national policies, law and programs, ultimately affecting the everyday lives of their citizens, including women. Without an equal number of women experts on board, however, the treaty bodies are more likely to overlook critical issues and perspectives that should be part of their legal agenda.

In [June](#) 2021, the Human Rights Council considered a [report](#) exploring the impact of women's underrepresentation in UN bodies and mechanisms — including the treaty bodies — and the overall challenges to gender parity. The report flagged four treaty bodies with low numbers of women among their membership: the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers (14 percent); the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (28 percent); the Committee against Torture (30 percent); and the Committee on Enforced Disappearances (30 percent). The representation of women across all treaty bodies is 48.83 percent but concentrated in only four of the 10 committees. Two of these address women's rights and children's rights: the CEDAW Committee and the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Currently, gender parity has been achieved only in the 18-member Committee, CRC.

One reason for the lack of gender parity in the treaty bodies is that countries have [not nominated](#) enough women as candidates for the committees. Countries that have ratified the relevant treaties nominate candidates and [elect members](#) for four-year terms at the

UN in New York City. Sadly, most nomination processes are informal and lack transparency, resulting in qualified women candidates left unaware of such vacancies.

This [gender gap can be solved](#) by countries and the OHCHR taking the action recommended in the report to the Human Rights Council. For example, countries could identify women candidates for treaty body membership and, where appropriate, give women preference. They also could incorporate gender as an explicit feature in nomination processes, as was done in Canada's [call for application](#) for membership in the Committee of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. They could track their progress on these gender parity measures across the 10 committees.

While the nomination of more women candidates would be a step forward, we also need to ensure that countries vote for and elect such candidates. Elections during the Covid-19 pandemic have relied on virtual campaigns, and candidates now also reach out to civil society organizations to lobby their governments to vote for qualified women candidates. In addition, an informal group of former women chairs and members of treaty bodies could be set up to mentor women candidates and advise them on their campaigns. Countries that have adopted a feminist foreign policy, like Canada, France, Luxembourg, Mexico and Sweden, could also play a leading role in promoting women candidates. OHCHR could advertise upcoming treaty body elections in women's networks, and track the number of women and men serving as independent experts, making this information public in a format similar to the [gender parity dashboard](#) used to measure staff composition in the UN Secretariat. It could also help countries design ways to achieve gender parity during the nomination and election processes.

We believe that High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Michelle Bachelet](#), is in a unique position to urge countries to take concerted action to push for gender parity in the treaty bodies. She could make a policy statement giving high priority to the achievement of gender equality in the committees and call for parity in nominations of candidates.

It is paradoxical that the [treaty bodies](#) entrusted with upholding the principle of non-discrimination based on sex use a process to select expert members that can result in discrimination. Now that the treaty bodies have been functioning for many years, it is long overdue for countries and the UN Secretariat to put their gender equality commitments into action.

Note: Thanks to Ms. Bhavya Mahajan, a lawyer and mediator from India, who helped with the research for the article.

About the authors

Judge Aruna Devi Narain is a judge of the Supreme Court of Mauritius and expert member (2017 - 2022), vice-chairperson, and rapporteur of the UN Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee).

Ms. Marcia Vaune Jocelyn Kran O.C. is an international lawyer from Canada; who was formerly Director at the UN Human Rights Office in Geneva and Senior Regional Manager at the UN Development Programme in Bangkok and Bratislava, and is a member of the UN Human Rights Committee (2017 – 2024).

*This article was first published in [PassBlue](#) on November 18, 2021

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

By Kristyna Foltinova

- ***Table of contents***
- ***Gender equality 50 years ago and now***
- ***Russia, falling below the world average***
- ***Hungary, one step away from gender equality***
- ***Iran, a paragon of gender inequality?***
- ***Interactive guide to gender inequality***
- ***Interesting data points***

RFERL (13.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3glkuly> - 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](#).

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.

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.

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.

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.

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/321DY04> - 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.

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](#).

WORLD: Support civil society at the UN Security Council

By Kaavya Asoka

NGOWG (01.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3eaCtXq> - 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 breifer.^[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?

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.”

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.

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."

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

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.

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.

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: 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.

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.

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: 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.

ZIMBABWE: Zimbabwe makes it illegal for schools to expel pregnant girls

Women's rights campaigners say new law will help ensure girls have equal rights to an education.

By Farai Shawn Matiashe

Thomson Reuters Foundation (25.08.2020) - <https://tmsnrt.rs/3hNqYhN> - Zimbabwe has made it illegal for schools to expel pupils who get pregnant, a measure women's rights campaigners said would help tackle gender inequality in the classroom and stop many girls from dropping out of school.

A legal amendment announced last week seeks to reinforce a 1999 guideline that was patchily implemented, and comes as school closures due to coronavirus raise fears of a rise in sexual abuse and unwanted pregnancies.

Many parents of pregnant girls, or the girls themselves, decide to quit schooling due to the pregnancy, and schools do not always do enough to encourage them to stay, officials say.

"I'm expecting every parent and guardian and everyone else to understand that every child must be assisted by all of us to go to school," Cain Mathema, the education minister in charge of schools, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation on Monday.

"Every child whether boy or girl... has a right to go to school in Zimbabwe," he said.

In 2018, 12.5% of the country's roughly 57,500 school dropouts stopped attending classes due to pregnancy or marriage reasons - almost all of them girls, according to Education Ministry statistics.

Priscilla Misihairwabwi-Mushonga, an opposition lawmaker who chairs a parliamentary education committee, said making the previous guidelines into a law with possible sanctions would make the rules more effective and address gender disparities.

"In circumstances where the pregnancy was a result of kids of the same age, the boy would not be necessarily expelled from school," she said.

"It was also a double tragedy for the girl... as in most circumstances, it was not a consensual sex but some sort of abuse by some predator older than her. So, she has been traumatised and raped then she is further traumatised by being kicked out of school."

Nyaradzo Mashayamombe, founding director of advocacy group Tag a Life International and leader of a consortium of organizations that pushed for the law, said she feared lockdown measures may have caused a spike in unwanted teen pregnancies.

"We are in a dangerous time where children have been out of school for a long time. Most of them are not even attending radio and television lessons," she said, calling for the government to ensure the new law is enforced.

Pregnancy is just one of the reasons that girls in Zimbabwe could fail to return to classes after coronavirus restrictions are lifted, said Sibusisiwe Ndlovu, communications specialist at Plan International Zimbabwe.

Poverty and early marriage will also stop some from resuming their studies, she said, welcoming the new legislation as a step in the right direction.

"This amendment is crucial in fulfilling the access to education right for all children - especially girls," Ndlovu said.

However, campaigners in the southern African country say girls will still need extra support to continue with their studies even if they keep attending classes while pregnant.

"Social support and financial resources are required for girls to fully utilise this window of opportunity," said Faith Nkala, national director of education nonprofit CAMFED Zimbabwe.

"Especially girls from marginalised families, who will need the additional support to remain in school, and to come back after giving birth."
