COVID-19 AND GENDER EQUALITY
A CALL TO ACTION FOR THE PRIVATE SECTOR

APRIL 2020

THE SITUATION

The COVID-19 pandemic is putting an unprecedented and significant strain on the global economy and public health systems. It is also highlighting and magnifying inequalities and the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by women and girls. The pandemic is moving beyond a global health crisis and morphing into a labour market, social and economic crisis, posing a serious threat to women's employment and livelihoods, especially in precarious informal and non-essential sectors.

Many companies have risen to the challenge and are using their resources to provide information, supplies, equipment and personnel in the fight against COVID-19. They have also offered flexible working arrangements, paid medical and sick leave, ensured income protection and provided emergency childcare for frontline workers.[1] Some CEOs and executives have even taken pay cuts so that their employees still have an income during this uncertain time. These policies are not only serving their employees but are helping to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and to protect the public healthcare system.

At the same time some companies, particularly in non-essential sectors like tourism and hospitality, are struggling to stay in business and people have been laid off and taken pay cuts. In the European Union, about 25% of women employees are in precarious jobs.[2] In the United States, unemployment was estimated at 13% on 3 April 2020, an increase of 8.5 million people compared to mid-March.[3] Millions of families are unable to buy basic necessities or pay their rent and utility bills

The COVID-19 pandemic calls for an immediate coordinated, people-centered and gender-sensitive response. Governments, businesses, workers' representatives and individuals all need to be involved to mitigate the impact on people's lives and to address the specific risks and vulnerabilities girls and women face because of the deeply rooted inequalities and stereotypes in society.

The private sector has a responsibility to use its power, influence and resources to protect the rights and physical and mental well-being of employees during this time, as well as to ensure long-term business recovery efforts restore economic stability. Businesses also play a key role in addressing the needs of women in their supply chains and customer base.

> *The COVID-19 pandemic is not just a health issue. It is a profound shock to our societies and economies, and women are at the heart of care and response efforts underway. As front-line responders, health professionals, community volunteers, transport and logistics managers, scientists and more, women are making critical contributions to address the outbreak every day."[4]*

As employers and an engine of economic growth, the private sector has an especially important role to play in not just mitigating the impact of COVID-19, but in slowing the spread of the virus. Early and targeted action by the private sector will reduce immediate health risks to employees, while also reducing the overall economic impact.

COVID-19 will have short and long-term effects on the global economy.[10] The layoffs we are witnessing today will be felt over the months and years to come throughout global supply chains, including in countries not currently in the epicentre of the pandemic.

DID YOU KNOW?

COVID-19 is affecting women in many ways, from concerns for their health and safety and income security, to additional caring responsibilities and increased exposure to domestic violence.

- Compounded economic impacts are felt especially by women and girls who are generally earning less, saving less and holding insecure jobs or living close to poverty.[5]

- Global value chains are being disrupted by COVID-19. Women play a key role at every level as farmers, workers, processors, entrepreneurs, buyers, service providers and employees.

- Women are at the frontline as healthcare workers, working long hours and exposing themselves to risk while caring for patients. Yet their jobs are often the most undervalued and underpaid.

- While early reports reveal more men are dying as a result of COVID-19, the health of women generally is adversely impacted through the reallocation of resources and priorities, including sexual and reproductive health services.[6]

- Closure of schools and childcare have placed significant additional care burdens on women in the home. It has put a spotlight on society's reliance on women and girls in informal and formal care structures.

- The impact on non-essential businesses, especially in the services sector, are particularly concerning for women as business owners and as employees. Many of them are losing their livelihoods because working from home is not an option.

Globally, women represent 55.8% of employees in service industries, while in the G7, women make up around 88% of the service industry workforce. Most are unable to work remotely and may require additional care support for children or older family members as they leave their homes to work.[7]

- As the COVID-19 pandemic deepens economic and social stress coupled with restricted movement and social isolation measures, gender-based violence is increasing exponentially.[8]

- Isolation and social distancing has increased the risk of domestic violence and abuse. Women in violent relationships are not only exposed to their abuser for long periods of time, they are unable to leave home or discreetly call helplines.[9]

- Women tend to rely much more on public transport than men, putting women at greater risk of catching COVID-19 as they commute to work, care for relatives or do grocery shopping.

- Social distancing is not possible for everyone. Millions of households depend on daily care and help from women as primary caretakers.

CALL TO ACTION

The Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) are a set of seven principles offering guidance to business on how to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the workplace, marketplace and community. During this time of upheaval and uncertainty, the WEPs are a great resource for the private sector to help them protect the most vulnerable groups. The WEPs are informed by international labour and human rights standards and are grounded in the recognition that businesses have both a stake in and a responsibility for gender equality and women's empowerment.

In addition to complying with local and national COVID-related policies and mandates, companies should take into consideration the three cross-cutting priorities laid out by the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres:[11]

1. Ensure women's equal representation in all COVID-19 response planning and decision-making;

2. Drive transformative change for equality by addressing issues of paid and unpaid care;

3. Target women and girls in all efforts to address the socio-economic impact of COVID-19.

These cross-cutting priorities should form part of any COVID-19 response, including through the WEPs framework, and should be centered around employees, women entrepreneurs in global supply chains, consumers as well as women and girls in local communities. They aim to ensure that no one is left behind during or after the COVID-19 crisis:

LEADERSHIP

• Ensure that COVID-19 specific policies and crisis responses are gender sensitive and inclusive, by consulting internal and external stakeholders;

• Consult and collaborate between governments, workers and employers, and their representatives is essential for responses to be effective and sustainable. Women must have opportunity to participate:

• Publicly signal the CEO and the executive team's commitment to addressing gender inequalities, and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic;

• Ensure there is diversity and that women's voices have a role in crisis taskforces and response teams, and that both women and men are represented and involved in decisions;

• Establish clear internal communication channels to employees with regular and accurate updates and advice about the COVID-19 situation;

• Support remote working at scale and tackle strains on the existing information technology and communications infrastructure;

• Spread the word about the gender differentiated impacts of the pandemic and encourage other companies to sign the WEPs.

WORKPLACE

• Be mindful of employees with caring responsibilities and accommodate the additional needs they may have during this time of crisis. This includes flexible working hours for parents, particularly single parents and parents of disabled children;

• Adopt flexible working arrangements with full pay during and beyond the COVID-19 crisis for all workers. Pay at least a living wage to short-term and contract workers, and offer paid sick, family and emergency leave.;

• Encourage men employees to share the burden of household work and unpaid care of children, the elderly and family members with disabilities;

• Consider the physical, mental and emotional health of all employees and be aware of women's increased exposure to domestic violence while confined to home. Consider establishing a special contact person within human resources to support staff experiencing domestic violence;

• Share widely, with all employees, information about public services, including domestic violence hotlines and support services for survivors of violence, psychosocial support services and pre- and post-natal healthcare.

MARKETPLACE

- Take the opportunity to discover new local businesses, particularly women-owned businesses who are affected by the crisis or those who are helping the pandemic response. Buy their products and services and encourage your business partners and employees to do the same;

- Provide leniency to women entrepreneurs that have had to close their business because of COVID-19 and may be struggling to pay debts. Offer targeted financial products and services to save them from bankruptcy;

- Take proactive measures through internal and external communications to challenge gender stereotypes and roles, discrimination, inequality and harmful masculinities.

COMMUNITY

- Promote awareness and visibility of small independent organizations and individual women or men that are at the frontline of pandemic response efforts;

- Provide grants to organizations and institutions such as women's associations and shelters that support women with specific needs: the elderly, survivors of violence, single mothers and disabled women;

- Donate personal protective equipment, food and services to support the daily lives of individuals in the community, and offer a short-term moratorium on household expenses like rent and utilities.

TRANSPARENCY AND REPORTING

- Collect and report on sex-disaggregated data related to evolving rates of infection, economic impacts, care burden, and the incidence of sexual violence and abuse[12];

- Share information about the gender-differentiated response to COVID-19 as part of your commitment to the WEPs.

ENDNOTES

1. See also www.unwomen.org and https://data2x.org/resource-center/gender-and-data-resources-related-to-covid-19/
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4. UN Women, In Focus: Gender equality matters in COVID-19 response, 2020, https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response
5. United Nations Secretary-General Policy Brief, "The Impact of Covid-19 On Women and Girls," 9 April 2020. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5029
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7. OECD, Small Businesses, Job Creation and Growth
8. United Nations Secretary-General Policy Brief, "The Impact of Covid-19 On Women and Girls," 9 April 2020. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5029
9. Women Are Using Code Words at Pharmacies to Escape Domestic Violence During Coronavirus Lockdown, News 7 Boston,6 April, 2020, https://whdh.com/news/women-are-using-code-words-at-pharmacies-to-escape-domestic-violence-during-coronavirus-lockdown/
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11. United Nations Secretary-General Policy Brief, "The Impact of Covid-19 On Women and Girls," 9 April 2020. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5029
12. See for example, UNICEF, ILO and UN Women. 2020. "Family-friendly policies and other good workplace practices in the context of COVID-19." Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/03/family-friendly-policies-and-other-good-workplace-practices-in-the-context-of-covid-19

Principle 1		Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality.
Principle 2		Treat all women and men fairly at work – respect and support human rights and nondiscrimination.
Principle 3		Ensure the health, safety and well-being of all women and men workers.
Principle 4		Promote education, training and professional development for women.
Principle 5		Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women.
Principle 6		Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy.
Principle 7		Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality

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