



## ACTION BRIEF

# WOMEN AS A FORCE FOR ACCELERATED AND INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC RECOVERY POST COVID-19 IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC



**Women's economic empowerment will be essential if we are to ensure that the economic recovery from COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific is as rapid as possible and includes all members of society.**

### What is the issue?

Emerging numbers indicate that the COVID-19 may be more lethal for men, but **women are taking the bigger socio-economic hit from the global pandemic.**<sup>1</sup> The societal and economic consequences are not impacting everyone equally but are **hitting the most vulnerable the hardest and exacerbating existing social and economic inequalities.**

**Women are disproportionately affected because they are most exposed to risks at both health and economic levels.** They make up the majority of front-line workers in care and other professions that are based on personal interaction, exposing them to higher risks of contagion. **They are also overrepresented in precarious employment, including in the informal sector,** where their benefits and protection are inadequate or lacking.



## THE HIT ON THE ECONOMY IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

COVID-19 has thrown the world into an unprecedented health, social and economic crisis, which is impacting all countries and societies directly or indirectly. Asia and the Pacific is estimated to be facing a combined **potential GDP loss as high as USD 800 billion and a very high rate of job losses**, including almost 50 million jobs in the travel and tourism sector<sup>2</sup> where the majority of workers are women.

The particular challenges brought on by COVID-19 in the Asia-Pacific region are adding to the obstacles facing the already **difficult progress on the Sustainable Development Goals and disrupting the movement of labour and supply chains** on which much of the region's economic strength depends.<sup>3</sup>

**Women workers, including women migrant workers of which there are 34 million in Asia and the Pacific, play a crucial role in services and labour-intensive manufacturing** as well as in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and in the informal sector on which much of the formal sector depends. These economic activities are now on hold and under threat because of lockdowns, border closures, broken supply chains, and discontinuation of production for an unknown length of time. **Many small businesses are unable to survive** more than a few weeks of interrupted income.



## THE RISK OF SLIDING BACK ON GENDER EQUALITY

With lockdowns, schools and social services suspended, and more people working from home, households are coping with extraordinary circumstances, competing priorities and increased pressures. In many cases this places an **extra care burden on girls and women** who are often expected to carry out multiple roles that are essential but unpaid. When home becomes the workplace and classroom for several family members at the same time this jeopardizes focus, effectiveness and productivity for all.

With household members confined at home, there is also a heightened risk of **domestic violence and sexual abuse**, which has been well-documented by research on previous pandemics and is already becoming a reality for women across the globe.<sup>5</sup> The prevalence of violence against women is already higher in Asia and the Pacific than elsewhere.

There is a risk that the aftermath of the pandemic could see a **backsliding of the recent years' gains in gender equality and women's empowerment**

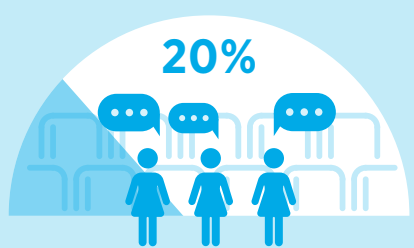
in the Asia-Pacific region. Only if governments and their partners make a conscious effort to apply a **gender-responsive approach to the post-pandemic challenges** can we hope to see an accelerated, inclusive and sustainable recovery.



## RECOVERY EFFORTS MUST INCLUDE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

Beyond the first priority of safeguarding people's health, there is a need to boost the economy as soon as the situation stabilizes, to save livelihoods and minimize the political, economic and social impact of the pandemic in the region. **Such a response must be gender-responsive, to address the disproportionate impact of the crisis on women and address their distinct needs, priorities, and solutions.** Unlocking women's economic and entrepreneurial potential as part of the recovery efforts can be a force for accelerated and inclusive economic recovery post-COVID-19.

**Support to business of all sizes and in all sectors will determine how the region will emerge from the COVID-19 crisis months and years from now.** Sectors where women are over-represented and underpaid must receive special attention. This includes the informal sector, where women are more likely to be own-account workers, daily wage earners, or contributing family workers where many work for low, informal or even no pay. **Engaging women as leaders and decision-makers in COVID-19 response and recovery, including stimulus measures and other support to the business sector, is essential to their effectiveness as well as to ensure they meet the needs of the most vulnerable workers.**



Only 20 percent of parliamentarians in Asia and the Pacific are women. As parliamentarians are debating and deciding on urgent public stimulus packages and other COVID-19 responses, it is crucial that women's organisations and women representatives are included and consulted.

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, ipu.org

## UN WOMEN'S APPROACH

UN Women's approach to addressing the impacts of COVID-19 is based on the **Leave No One Behind principle** of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is crucial to focus attention on those most at risk of losing their livelihoods and freedoms, where women are overrepresented. At the same time women must be recognized as decision-makers and change agents equal to men, and with equally important but distinct needs and priorities.

UN Women is contributing to COVID-19 response and recovery strategies that link equality, health and the economy. This includes initiatives to connect private and public sectors for a coordinated, people-centred approach, with a **conscious effort to put women front and centre of both the immediate and long-term responses**. Paying attention to women's needs and leadership will strengthen the COVID-19 response in the Asia-Pacific region.

## CALL FOR ACTION

Despite the significant social, economic and health challenges that COVID-19 brings, UN Women sees an opportunity in the COVID-19 response for **radical, positive action to redress long-standing inequalities in multiple areas of women's lives**. UN Women executive director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka is asking governments and all other service providers including the private sector to take this opportunity to plan their **response to COVID-19 with a strong gender perspective, proactively building gender expertise into response teams** and embedding gender dimensions within response and recovery plans.

In this, UN Women joins other calls for using the opportunity to work towards **structural changes and the dismantling of ingrained power structures** that harm girls and women every day but so much more in the times of crisis. **By taking the right steps now, we can build back better, stronger, resilient and equal societies, and restore the future.**


## Recommendations for all actors responding to COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific

- **All COVID-19 response, relief and recovery plans and programmes must be gender-responsive** and tackle the disproportionate impact of the crisis on women and address their distinct needs, priorities and solutions.
- **Women's inclusion, participation and leadership in all decision-making processes for economic COVID-19 recovery measures** by private and public sectors must be ensured, based on mitigation strategies that specifically target the economic impact of the pandemic on women's lives and livelihoods.
- **Economic stimulus packages** and other economic support should target not only big business but also be channelled to workers, including in the informal sector, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) who underpin the economy in Asia and the Pacific. Specific attention should be aimed at sectors such as manufacturing, tourism and hospitality, and other businesses where women are predominantly employed in precarious contracts and particularly vulnerable to a global economic recession.
- **All migrant populations, women and men, must be provided with full and equal protection and in compliance with international law**, and employers should fulfil their responsibilities of decent employment and extend additional necessary support that is inclusive and gender-responsive for their migrant workers and their families.
- The pandemic has laid bare **girls' and women's disproportionate share of unpaid care and work across the world**. As a crucial part of the recovery, solutions must be explored to identify and develop models for **accessible, affordable and quality care services** to meet the needs of families and households as women and men return to work.
- As part of their short- and longer-term COVID-19 recovery, **companies must include gender-sensitive measures** to ensure that women are not left behind in the workplace and across their entire value chains at a challenging time. Applying a gender lens to business recovery strategies will secure a stronger, more inclusive and sustainable resilience against future challenges. As has already been proven, the **integration of gender equality principles into business practices and culture brings economic and other benefits**. The Women's Empowerment Principles, established by UN Women and the UN Global Compact, provide guidance and tools for companies that are committed to this agenda.



# GUIDANCE NOTES FOR ACTION

UN Women Asia and the Pacific is sharing these **Guidance for Action** notes to supply recommendations to all relevant stakeholders on how to address women’s needs and participation in the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. These aim to help make the economy more inclusive, with a special focus on women’s different roles as employees, entrepreneurs, migrant workers, and the labour underpinning global supply chains.



**ACTION BRIEF**

**GUIDANCE FOR ACTION: GENDER-SENSITIVE PRIVATE SECTOR RESPONSE TO COVID-19 FOR ACCELERATED AND INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC RECOVERY**

**UN WOMEN**

**BACKGROUND**

Declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization, the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has affected nearly every country in the world. As nations implement rigid measures to contain the spread of the virus, economies worldwide have been disrupted and companies are challenged in providing safety and security to their employees while maintaining business continuity. Just as women have been disproportionately affected in previous pandemics,<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 is already having major, differentiated impacts on women. The private sector not only has a responsibility to protect the rights of all its employees and workers, but also directly benefits by doing so. The current crisis presents a key opportunity for companies to support women across their entire value chains and become leaders in providing a gender-inclusive COVID-19 response and recovery.

Major economic institutions are warning that the COVID-19 outbreak could lead to a global recession.<sup>2</sup> Existing gendered economic inequalities in the Asia-Pacific region leave women particularly vulnerable to the potential effects of such a recession. Major economies in the region, including China, India, Indonesia, Thailand and Viet Nam, are all experiencing declines in female labour force participation rates,<sup>3</sup> and the number of women in leadership positions in business has decreased in several Asia-Pacific countries in the past 20 years.<sup>4</sup> As this guidance note explains, COVID-19 response and recovery plans do not integrate a gender lens; these regressions may be exacerbated and lead to losses not only for businesses but also for economies across the region.



**ACTION BRIEF**

**GUIDANCE FOR ACTION: SUPPORTING SMEs TO ENSURE THE ECONOMIC COVID-19 RECOVERY IS GENDER-RESPONSIVE AND INCLUSIVE**

**UN WOMEN**

**BACKGROUND**

**Women-owned SMEs** | **SMEs in Asia and the Pacific** | **Risk of bankruptcy**

The COVID-19 crisis is hitting women particularly hard, so they make up the majority of those most vulnerable at work, and they often bear the brunt of reduced pressure at home. The crisis is also having a greater impact on small and medium enterprises (SMEs), as these have less capacity to absorb the shocks to supply chain and to customer revenue.

The SME sector is hit hardest and women are facing compounded challenges. They are particularly vulnerable to the current crisis. However, SMEs will also be essential to the economic recovery as SMEs make up 96 percent of all businesses in Asia, and account for two out of three private-sector jobs.<sup>5</sup>

85 percent of SMEs in China have said that they would face bankruptcy if the loss of income from COVID-19 lasts three months, rising to 95 percent of SMEs if it lasts six months.



**ACTION BRIEF**

**GUIDANCE FOR ACTION: ADDRESSING THE EMERGING IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MIGRANT WOMEN IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC FOR A GENDER-RESPONSIVE RECOVERY**

**UN WOMEN**

**BACKGROUND**

The COVID-19 pandemic will disproportionately affect women migrant workers across Asia and the Pacific,<sup>6</sup> in particular those with migrant migration status. In normal circumstances, women migrant workers already face various risks, including restrictive migration policies, insecure forms of labour, language barriers, overcrowded living conditions, racism, xenophobia, lack of legal recognition, and undervaluation of their contribution to social and economic development.<sup>7</sup> Women migrant workers are also exposed to multiple intersections of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, nationality, age, migration status or other sex or gender-associated characteristics. The surge in COVID-19 cases is causing sudden travel restrictions and other policy changes that exacerbate these risks. This note mainly focuses on the emerging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women migrant workers and recommendations to support governments, donors, civil society organizations, employers and the private sector in addressing those impacts.

In the Asia-Pacific region, the number of migrant women increased by 48 percent from 23 million in 2000 to 43 million in 2017.<sup>8</sup> Given the feminization of migration within Asia, in particular for domestic and care work in the informal sector, women migrant workers are already more likely to work in insecure labour, under precarious conditions. Globally, women make up 70 percent of front-line workers in the health and social sector, including as nurses, midwives, cleaners and laundry workers, many of whom are migrant workers. The International Labour Organization (ILO) predicts that, due to COVID-19, unemployment could rise globally by almost 25 million, with these estimates tremendously affecting women and migrants.<sup>9</sup> It has been estimated that the

## Guidance for Action: Gender-sensitive private sector response to COVID-19 for accelerated and inclusive economic recovery

This Note lays out how COVID-19 is impacting women in business and across the supply chains of companies in different ways. These depend on women’s roles, and can include increased care responsibilities, vulnerability that stems from being overrepresented in sectors particularly affected by COVID-19, and being disadvantaged by the existing digital divide as more work functions are likely to move to new and more technology-based modalities as a result of COVID-19. The heightened risk for domestic violence when home and workplaces merge is a particularly negative impact of the pandemic and must be addressed by all stakeholders.

## Guidance for Action: Supporting SMEs to ensure the economic COVID-19 recovery is gender-responsive and inclusive

This Note shows how the barriers women entrepreneurs already face in starting and retaining a business are likely to increase in the aftermath of COVID-19. Those barriers include less access than male entrepreneurs to information and communications technology, financial services and assets, legal rights, business management skills and networking opportunities. Recovery responses must include a gender lens on SME support measures including integration of gender-responsive procurement policies to increase the numbers of female suppliers in value chains.

## Guidance for Action: Addressing the emerging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant women in Asia and the Pacific for a gender-responsive recovery

This Note shows women migrant workers’ particular vulnerabilities during times of crisis, such as less freedom of movement, poor working and living conditions, weakened occupational health and safety, and increased risk of violence. As women are often the sole provider for their families in their countries of origin, this could result in a COVID-19 ripple effect on millions of their dependents in the region.





## PARTNERING WITH UN WOMEN DURING THE TIME OF COVID-19

UN Women's mandate is to strengthen gender equality and women's empowerment across the world in collaboration with multiple partners – public and private sector, governments, international organizations, civil society organizations, academia, activists and others – and for large-scale impact through advocacy, research and data, and programming, including in emergency response and in times of crisis.

**To support and strengthen women's economic rights, participation and empowerment across the world, UN Women offers a range of expertise and collaborative actions:**

- ▶ **Rapid assessment of the COVID-19 outbreak and its impact on women's socio-economic opportunities** in specific contexts, including time use and livelihood impact.
- ▶ **Tools and guidance on gender and impact assessments** of value chains, procurement, and other business specific areas to strengthen gender equality in business practices.
- ▶ **Development of large-scale women's economic empowerment** programmes, based on multi-stakeholder consultations, gender analysis and evidence, and addressing socio-economic challenges and inequalities, in multiple contexts.
- ▶ **Complementing existing or specific COVID-19 designed recovery programmes, policies and advocacy efforts by bringing a gender lens** on all sectors.
- ▶ **Expertise in producing gender-disaggregated data to gather evidence** for targeted advocacy, awareness raising, communication, programming and the promotion of gender equality, women's rights and inclusive, gender-sensitive business and entrepreneurship.
- ▶ **Strategic guidance to private sector companies on the implementation of the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs)**. With the WEPs, UN Women partners with corporations around the world to integrate gender equality into business practices and culture, and offers a set of tools and guidance in this regard. New guidance is now being developed to align with COVID-19 response analysis and initiatives.
- ▶ **Collaboration with governments and other stakeholders to ensure COVID-19 response and recovery efforts that are gender-sensitive, inclusive, and people-focused**. This includes economic stimulus packages that will address the specific needs and challenges of the most vulnerable including women in the informal sector.
- ▶ **Guidance on developing gender-sensitive and women-focused spaces and networks for innovation and entrepreneurship**, in support of the overall promotion of women's entrepreneurship, in collaboration with global, regional and national organisations and networks.



- <sup>1</sup> COVID-19: The gendered impacts of the outbreak. The Lancet, Vol 395, March 14, 2020.
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1107493/coronavirus-travel-tourism-gdp-loss/>
- <sup>3</sup> The Impact and Policy Responses for COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific. UN-ESCAP, Bangkok, March 2020.
- <sup>4</sup> COVID-19: The gendered impacts of the outbreak. The Lancet, Vol 395, March 14, 2020.
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1107493/coronavirus-travel-tourism-gdp-loss/>



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## WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES

Established by UN Women and the  
UN Global Compact Office

Learn more about the Women's  
Empowerment Principles (WEPs):  
[www.weps.org](http://www.weps.org)

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Gender equality means good business

