

SUMMARY
OF THE E-DISCUSSION ON

**WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP
IN THE COVID-19 RESPONSE**

PUBLISHED BY iKNOWPOLITICS

A JOINT PROJECT OF



*Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.*

JUNE 2020

LAUNCHING MESSAGE

Background

Women are hardest hit by the current COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts. Beyond the direct effect of the infection by the coronavirus, women's health and safety are at greater risk as increased prevalence of domestic [violence and abuse](#) is reported and sexual and reproductive health services are reduced. In this time of unprecedented crisis, women also face an increased burden of care and subsequent [risk of getting sick](#) because they represent the majority of front-line healthcare workers and caregivers in homes and communities globally. This is all in addition to the disproportionate indirect impact of the pandemic on women's livelihoods everywhere. With the majority of women working in the [informal economy](#), they often lack health insurance and social security, putting them further at risk.

While women make up [70%](#) of the world's healthcare workers and are overall more vulnerable in times of crisis, they only make up [25%](#) of legislators and [6%](#) of state and government leaders. Emergency response taskforces around the world are overwhelmingly male-dominated, as seen for example in the [United States](#) and the [United Kingdom](#). Additionally, [few women](#) are invited and quoted in the media to provide expertise on relief and recovery responses.

Representation always matters, especially in times of crisis. The ways we respond to the pandemic and its ramifications will challenge democratic institutions in an unprecedented way if the appropriate steps are not taken. With elections being postponed or remote voting anticipated, parliaments closing or deliberations taking place online, and traditional media spaces reduced, women's voices may be further silenced as gender equality issues move to the back burner.

To ensure an optimal relief and recovery response without compromising women's safety and rights, governments and decision-makers across all sectors must include a gender perspective in all decisions. Gender-sensitive policies that recognize and respond to women's needs will benefit not just women but society at large. More than ever, this crisis has shown that people's safety and wellbeing is determined by decision-makers, both elected and unelected. We are all as vulnerable as the most vulnerable among us.

Objective

This e-Discussion raised awareness about the lack of women's leadership and representation in COVID-19 relief and recovery decision-making and on the importance of incorporating gender-sensitive responses during and after the crisis. Women in politics, civil society activists, practitioners and researchers joined this e-Discussion from 15 April to 8 May 2020. The submissions have contributed to the elaboration of the below consolidated response, augmenting the knowledge base available on the topic.

Questions

1. Is sex-disaggregated data on the effects of the pandemic available? How has your national and local government responded to the specific needs of women and girls in your area?
2. Are women leaders visible in your country/area? Can you share examples of successful women leaders' initiatives to mitigate coronavirus impacts? What sector are they working in, and what contributions did they make?
3. What can be done by governments, parliaments, civil society, and the media to ensure women's voices are more included?

4. What are the non-formal sectors and spaces where key decisions are being taken and women's voices need to be bolstered (e.g. logistics, supply chains, etc.)?

CONTRIBUTORS

iKNOW Politics and its partners thank their followers for taking the time to participate in this e-Discussion and share experiences, practices, and recommendations. The following participants joined the e-Discussion:

1. [Ana Avalos](#), **Spain** (Spanish)
2. [Annie Matundu-Mbambi](#), National President of The International League of Women for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), **Democratic Republic of Congo** (French)
3. [Catherine Mabobori](#), Former Member of Parliament and Secretary-General of the *Mouvement des Femmes et Filles pour la Paix et la Sécurité*, **Burundi** (French)
4. [Cinthya Mendoza](#), Physician, Former Member of Parliament Cochabamba, **Bolivia** (Spanish)
5. [Desirée Viteri](#), Doctorate in Law and Political Science, University of Barcelona, **Ecuador** (Spanish)
6. [Janeth Cuestas](#), **Panama** (Spanish)
7. [Lucia](#) (Spanish)
8. [Mariana Duarte](#), Gender Programme Officer at the Inter-Parliamentary Union, **Switzerland** (English)
9. [Mireille Rabenoro](#), President of the National Independent Human Rights Commission, **Madagascar** (French)
10. [Silvia Lopez Prieto](#), Intern at International IDEA, **Sweden** (English and Spanish)
11. [Siti Fuadilla Alchumaira](#), Co-Founder of Empowomen and Project officer at Save The Children, **Indonesia** (English)

SUMMARY

1. **Is sex-disaggregated data on the effects of the pandemic available? How has your national and local government responded to the specific needs of women and girls in your area?**

Comprehensive sex-disaggregated data is essential for well-designed and effective responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects. When governments do not collect or publish data, it is difficult for policy and decision-makers to accurately assess the situation and provide adequate responses for all. Governments are operating under intense pressure to act quickly, which often means acting without enough information or considering a wide array of perspectives. Gender-blind policies and responses are often ineffective, as they are not informed by the specificities and needs of half the population.

Participants report that sex-disaggregated data is not always available when it comes to the spread and effects of COVID-19. [Silvia López Prieto](#) directs to [Global Health 50/50](#) as a source of COVID-19 sex-disaggregated data, gathered in partnership with CNN. The initiative has compiled data from the hardest-hit countries to help analyze how the pandemic affects women and men differently. Sex-disaggregated data is not available for all countries at the moment, which makes studying the global effects of the pandemic on men and women difficult.

Among the 20 countries studied first, the [research](#) finds that six countries¹ provide sex-disaggregated data for confirmed cases and deaths (**China, France, Germany, Iran, Italy, and South Korea**); seven countries provide sex-disaggregated data for confirmed cases only (**Austria, Canada, Denmark, Japan, Norway,**

¹ At the time of data collection on 20 March 2020.

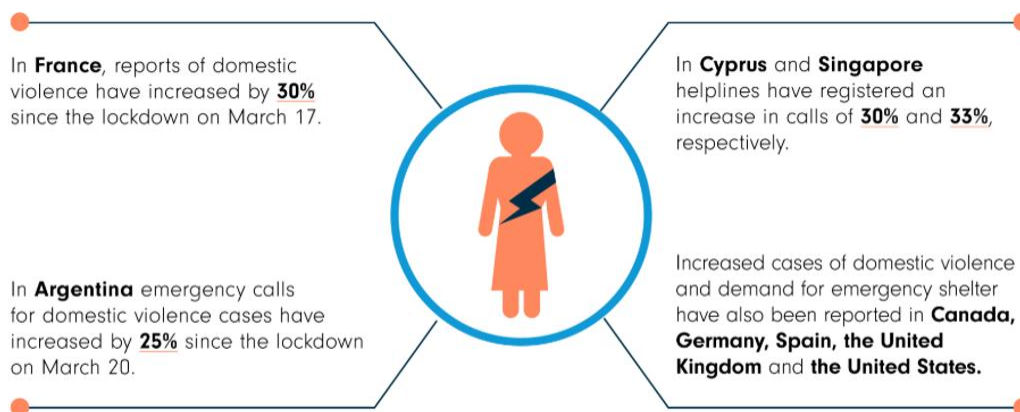
Sweden, and **Switzerland**); and no sex-disaggregated data could be located for the remaining seven countries (**Belgium**, **Malaysia**, **Netherlands**², **Portugal**, **Spain**³, **United Kingdom**, and the **United States of America**).

To help bridge the gender data gap, UN Women and World Health Organization joined forces to provide a clearer picture of the gender dimension of COVID-19 to help inform policy decisions and ensure they are responsive to women and girls' needs in a [platform](#) with a live tracker of cases, resources, and responses.

Although data shows that the coronavirus infects and kills more men than women, women are more exposed to the virus and its direct and indirect effects on their lives. Globally, women make up 70% of the world's healthcare workers. More specifically, [Silvia López Prieto](#) reports that studies from the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) show that 76% of the healthcare workers and 82% of the cashiers in the EU are women, making them overwhelmingly exposed as frontline and essential workers.

The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated existing inequalities, [exposing women's vulnerabilities](#) which are in turn magnifying the impacts of the pandemic. Women generally earn and save less than men – having more insecure, low-paid, part-time, and informal jobs – which makes them more susceptible to experience the economic impact of the coronavirus crisis. As an example of emergency measures designed for vulnerable workers, [Silvia López Prieto](#) shares that the Spanish government has established an extraordinary subsidy for domestic workers – the majority of whom are women – acknowledging their particular vulnerability. This is the [first time](#) domestic workers in **Spain** have the right to unemployment benefits.

Furthermore, bearing the majority of unpaid care workers, women are faced with increased domestic responsibilities and stress as schools shut down and the needs of the elderly are heightened. Social distancing and movement restrictions have exposed women and girls to gender-based violence, as they are forced to stay at home with abusers and lack access to support networks and services. Emerging data gathered by UN Women [shows](#) that violence against women and girls has intensified since the outbreak of COVID-19.



Source: UN Women data.unwomen.org

² The government reported it was in the process of compiling sex-disaggregated data, which was not yet available at the time of reporting.

³ Ibid.

Spain passed a law to help gender-based violence and sexual exploitation survivors by guaranteeing access to emergency centers and safe accommodation, reports [Silvia López Prieto](#). The government has also put in place a plan known as “Mascarilla 19” (Mask 19) to facilitate reporting gender-based violence incidents. The initiative enables victims of gender-based violence and abuse to disclose their situation by simply going to their local pharmacy and saying the words “Mascarilla 19,” after which the pharmacist notifies the authorities. Similarly, the government has included an SOS button in the national police app AlertCops for victims to report emergency cases without the perpetrator’s knowledge.

[Catherine Mabobori](#), representing the *Mouvement des femmes et filles pour la paix et la sécurité* (MFFPS) in **Burundi**, shares that MFFPS has put in place a relief fundraiser to support the most vulnerable, particularly women refugees, as their livelihoods are lost or reduced because of the pandemic. The MFFPS has also provided psychological support to women helping them cope with the reality of living in lockdown.

2. Are women leaders visible in your country/area? Can you share examples of successful women leaders’ initiatives to mitigate coronavirus impacts? What sector are they working in, and what contributions did they make?

Women are severely under-represented in political and decision-making institutions. As of 1 May 2020, 7.2% of Heads of State (10 out of 152) and 6.2% of Heads of Government (12 out of 193) are women.⁴ Powerful bias and prejudice against women in politics are held by both men and women worldwide. UNDP’s newly released [Gender Social Norms Index](#) reveals that about half of the world’s men and women think that men make better political leaders.

However, it is [widely reported](#) that countries with the most successful responses to the outbreak and its effects are led by women. Women Heads of State and Government of countries such as **Germany**, **Norway**, and **Finland** are [applauded](#) for their exemplary leadership and for being voices of reason in the chaos of the pandemic. **New Zealand**’s Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern for example is described as having handled the crisis with calm, empathetic, and clear messaging.

In **Madagascar**, the second most visible official leading the fight against the coronavirus, after the President, is medical expert Vololontiana Hanta, who delivers two daily updates on the progress of the virus on national television, according to [Mireille Rbenoro](#). She also reports that women ministers – who account for about one-third of the country’s government – are quite active and visible. Examples include women ministers in charge of the labor, industry, education, scientific research, environment, and social affairs portfolios.

In **Bolivia**, Interim President and Head of Government Jeanine Áñez is hailed as a successful leader amidst the crisis. [Cinthya Mendoza](#) shares that in her five months in office, President Áñez established swift preventive measures and ordered the largest purchase of health equipment in the country’s history.

[Siti Fuadilla Alchumaira](#) shares the example of a woman mayor leading a java region in **Indonesia** who quickly established a strategic plan for her constituency and led coordination actions with various

⁴ Data compiled by UN Women based on information provided by Permanent Missions to the United Nations. Only elected heads of state have been accounted for. In Bolivia and Switzerland, the head of state and government is the same.

partners, including the local and national authorities and civil society, such as providing disinfection and isolation facilities.

Spain's Minister of Equality Irene Montero Gil, who led the previously mentioned "Mascarilla 19" operation, and Minister of Economic Affairs Nadia Calviño Santamaría, whose ministry has implemented economic assistance to the most vulnerable, are examples of women leaders at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19 and its impacts, reports [Silvia López Prieto](#). She also shares the example of Minister of Education María Isabel Celaá Diéguez who coordinated with local authorities to ensure the continuity of education amidst the lockdown. Under her leadership, the government ensured internet access for all, offered courses for teachers providing guidance on how to use new technologies for remote learning, and issued recommendations for families with special-needs children.

3. What can be done by governments, parliaments, civil society, and the media to ensure women's voices are more included?

Evidence shows unequivocally that policies and responses that do not consult or include women in decision-making are simply less effective, and can even do harm.⁵ Governments, parliaments, civil society, and the media have all a crucial role to play in ensuring women's voices are included in the relief and recovery responses to COVID-19.

For governments, political will is key. Participants agree that governments are uniquely positioned to facilitate all responses by first and foremost collecting timely and complete sex-disaggregated data on risk factors, access to care, symptoms, cases, deaths, and overall impact. This much-needed information enables all other actors to establish informed and optimal measures to ensure women are included, protected and heard.

It is also the governments' responsibility to protect and promote human rights, including taking measures to eliminate discrimination against women and ensure their full and equal participation and representation in all decision-making bodies, especially in times of crisis. [Siti Fuadilla Alchumaira](#) stresses on governments' key role in coordinating the various actors into a comprehensive and cohesive response, taking into account and including women and their perspectives. [Ana Avalos](#) adds the importance of government coordination with civil society, especially women's organizations, in strengthening the reach and impact of gender-sensitive actions.

At a time when parliaments and their structures are meeting in a reduced capacity, it is vital to secure women's participation and leadership at all levels. [Mariana Duarte](#) shares measures published by the Inter-parliamentary Union as a guide for parliaments to ensure women's contribution in the response efforts:

- Decision-making and oversight committees, units and/or task forces put in place in parliament to respond to the crisis need to ensure women MPs' participation and leadership.
- Equal participation of men and women and a clear gender-mainstreaming mandate are key to ensure the inclusivity and efficiency of all parliamentary mechanisms.

⁵ UN Secretary General's Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women, page 3. United Nations, 9 April 2020: unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406

- Women representatives of labor market sectors, women working in the informal sector, and women care workers need to be invited and included in parliamentary deliberations, whether they are in person or via video conferencing.
- Continued activity of gender equality committees and the inclusion of gender equality in the mandate of new special parliamentary committees overseeing the government’s response are essential to guarantee an accountable institutional commitment to gender mainstreaming and, ultimately, efficient parliamentary response to the pandemic.⁶

Participants acknowledge that media, in its various forms, has played an incredibly important role in keeping populations informed and giving them space to voice their concerns and contributions. Media have a responsibility in making sure women are equally represented in their programs and communication tools and fairly portrayed while providing a safe space to voice their specific issues and solutions to the response and recovery efforts.

4. What are the non-formal sectors and spaces where key decisions are being taken and women’s voices need to be bolstered (e.g. logistics, supply chains, etc.)?

Globally, women are more financially vulnerable and their capacity to absorb economic shocks is less than that of men. While women’s unpaid care work – a major driver of gender inequality – has been exponentially increased by the COVID-19 crisis, it has also made clear that the daily functioning of families, communities, and the economy are dependent on this invisible work.⁷

Across all sectors, actions and responses that ignore women’s perspectives and needs are doomed to be less effective and even fail. This is true for all spheres of the formal and informal economy, healthcare, education, culture, and public sectors. As structures and systems across sectors are rebuilt in the aftermath of the pandemic, there is an unprecedented opportunity to ensure they are more gender-sensitive, and therefore more resilient. Bold and concrete measures need to be taken so that gender equality gains, particularly in terms of women’s leadership and participation in public and private decision-making entities, are maintained and strengthened.

The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities at all levels. It is therefore essential that we all learn the lessons it brings and ensure we come out of it with a more inclusive, equitable, and resilient world. This can only be achieved if we put women at the front and center of all responses and renewed systems. This will ensure a swifter recovery and more sustainable human development.

⁶ For additional information, see the IPU guidance note for parliaments on Gender and Covid-19 at ipu.org/gender-and-covid-19-guidance-note-parliaments.

⁷ UN Secretary General’s Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women, page 15. United Nations, 9 April 2020: unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406