



# Hold the line

COVID-19 and the pushbacks on gains made on gender equality and women's rights

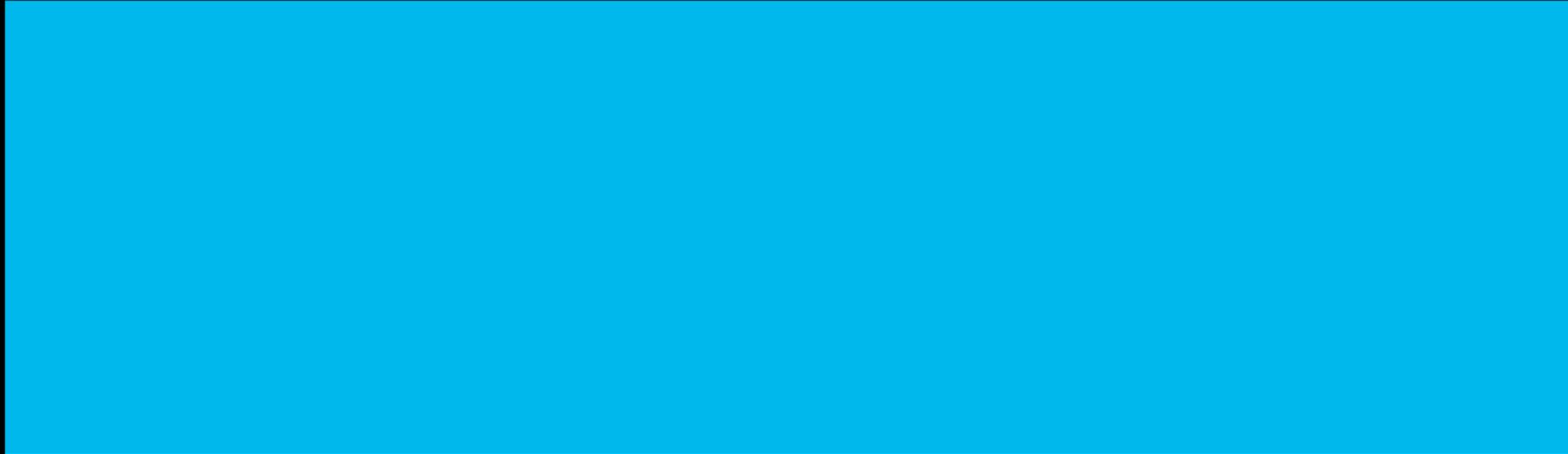
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# Abstract

**“Quick Scan” of the response to COVID-19 on Sustainable Support for Gender Equality and Women’s Rights, Gender, Peace and Security, and Gender and a Sustainable Economy.**

**This paper summarizes main trends on the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis; significant policy responses from international organisations, national governments and business; the needs and key responses of civil society actors and; recommendations for policymakers and the Dutch government.**



**1.**

**Introduction:  
Dual Effects of  
COVID-19 on  
Gender Inequality**



## Introduction

In early days of the COVID-19 crisis, it was branded as ‘the great equalizer’; this narrative quickly changed, based on vast evidence that the outbreak, in fact, exacerbated inequalities world-wide.<sup>1</sup> As in other crises, people in vulnerable positions are hit hardest. The same consequences can be observed for gender equality and women’s rights. On the one hand, the pandemic affects existing inequalities for women and gender non-conforming persons negatively, and simultaneously, women’s and gender rights activists face obstacles in ensuring that these inequalities are brought to the attention of governments and international institutions.

Academics who have studied previous pandemic episodes, such as ebola, found that they had deep negative effects on gender equality illustrated by, for example, longer lasting effects on women’s incomes.<sup>2,3</sup> Also the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) released a Technical Brief in March,<sup>4</sup> stressing that pandemics make existing inequalities for women and girls worse; women are less likely than men to have power in decision making around the outbreak, and as a consequence their needs may go largely unmet; and women and girls may be at higher risk of gender-based violence (GBV), including intimate partner violence.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, frontline defenders, women’s rights activists and gender rights organisations simultaneously face increased obstacles in ensuring that the issues above are indeed brought to the attention of governments and international institutions. Some worrying trends in shrinking civic space and new emergency laws and restrictive legislation, supposedly to tackle

the COVID-19 crisis, can be observed in for example Hungary,<sup>6</sup> Cambodia and the US.<sup>7</sup>

Assessing the impacts of the continuing COVID-19 crisis on conflicts, economies and people in vulnerable positions, it is essential to inform and tailor the responses of governments and partners and ensure that no one is left behind in this effort. The course of development and human rights in the long-run will be affected by the choices which governments make today.

## How to read this document

In light of these events, WO=MEN Dutch Gender Platform (hereafter WO=MEN) commissioned an exploratory analysis or Quick Scan of the response to COVID-19 on their three main focus areas: Sustainable Support for Gender Equality and Women’s Rights, Gender, Peace and Security, and Gender and a Sustainable Economy.

This paper gathers important (but by no means exhaustive) findings and trends in the period March-July 2020 regarding the three focus areas on:

- A.** Impacts of the COVID-19 crisis;
- B.** Key policy responses so far from international organisations, national governments and business;
- C.** The needs and key responses of civil society actors active on the three focus areas, and;
- D.** Recommendations for policymakers and the Dutch government.

The Quick Scan is based on literature, organisational statements and news articles (released between April-July 2020), on information provided during international organisations’ and civil society organisations’ (CSOs) webinars, and on 17 interviews with key organisations working on gender equality and women’s rights in the three focus areas.

**“When people try to be cheerful about social distancing and working from home, noting that William Shakespeare and Isaac Newton did some of their best work while England was ravaged by the plague, there is an obvious response: Neither of them had child-care responsibilities.”<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Lewis, Helen (March 19, 2020) “The Coronavirus Is A Disaster For Feminism”, The Atlantic.

<sup>1</sup> Jones, Owen (April 9, 2020). Coronavirus is not some great leveller: it is exacerbating inequality right now. The Guardian.

<sup>2</sup> As stated by Julia Smith, a health-policy researcher at Simon Fraser University, to the New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/us/women-coronavirus-greater-risk.html>

<sup>3</sup> ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment High-level panel (June 11 2020). Statement by Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Available on: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> UNFPA (2020). Technical Brief, COVID-19: A Gender Lens : Protecting Sexual And Reproductive Health And Rights, And Promoting Gender Equality. Available on:

[https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19\\_A\\_Gender\\_Lens\\_Guidance\\_Note.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_A_Gender_Lens_Guidance_Note.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Helsinki Committee (2020). Assessment of the proposed law to extend the state of emergency and its constitutional preconditions. Available on: <https://www.helsinki.hu/en/unlimited-power-is-not-the-panacea/>

<sup>7</sup> CIVICUS (2020). Civic Freedoms And The COVID-19 Pandemic: A Snapshot Of Restrictions And Attacks. Available on: <https://monitor.civicus.org/COVID19/>

# 2. Sustainable Support for Gender & Women's rights

**Sustainable social, political and financial support for gender equality and women's rights is one of WO=MEN's three focus areas.<sup>1</sup> This chapter summarizes the main impacts on, policy trends in and responses to the support for gender equality and to civic space.**

### A. Impact

#### 1. Exposing Vulnerabilities & Pushback on Gains

COVID-19 has very effectively put the spotlight on the world's existing inequalities. As one respondent puts it: "instead of the 'great equalizer', we rather call it the 'great magnifier'. All issues that we were previously working on have been exacerbated. Partners witness how marginalized groups are carrying the heaviest burden during this pandemic."<sup>8</sup>

**"The COVID-19 pandemic is not the root cause, but a reinforcement and aggravator of that what has been discriminatory before in our systems and communities, including by oppressing and victimizing women in many areas of daily life. Viruses don't discriminate, societies and systems do."<sup>9</sup>**

Most notably, impacts can be felt in gains made on GBV. All 17 respondents interviewed for this study mentioned this as a major impact. The United Nations (UN) has produced statistics that show the surge is up 25 percent – but this is likely more.<sup>10</sup> In Latin America, there has been a spike in femicides after governments imposed lockdowns, leaving

<sup>8</sup> AWID

<sup>9</sup> Schalatek, Liane (2020). The invisible coronavirus makes systemic gender inequalities and injustices visible. Available on: <https://us.boell.org/en/2020/04/30/invisible-coronavirus-makes-systemic-gender-inequalities-and-injustices-visible>

<sup>10</sup> AWID

policymakers and law enforcement scrambling to prevent attacks.<sup>11</sup> In the MENA region, for example, NGOs and governments across countries have noted an increase in calls through hotlines for reporting domestic violence<sup>12</sup>, as well as in the number of reported cases.<sup>13</sup> Restrictive social norms, that see men as heads of household and responsible for the family income, are considered to play a role. As an OECD report illustrates: "If the crisis prevents men from upholding this role, frustrations may be vented in the form of violence against women and girls."<sup>14</sup>

Aside from women being trapped in their homes, there is a fear that already scarce psycho-social support will be put on hold.<sup>15</sup> As the need for GBV services increases, available services "are likely to dwindle as resources are diverted to dealing with the coronavirus. For example, shelters are being repurposed as health centres or their staff are left off the list of 'essential services.'<sup>16</sup> Also due to the lockdowns, women and girls are (even more) unable to go out to seek support. Access to justice for survivors is observed to have become limited as state institutions scale down operations. The diversion in resources from routine health services has a major impact also on essential sexual and reproductive

<sup>11</sup> Prusa, Anya, Garcia, Beatriz & Soledad, Olivia (May 15, 2020).

Pandemic of Violence: Protecting Women during COVID-19. Available on: <https://reliefweb.int/report/mexico/pandemic-violence-protecting-women-during-COVID-19>

<sup>12</sup> Oxfam (2020), Life under lockdown: part I.

Available on: <https://oxfamjordan.exposure.co/life-under-lockdown-part-i?source=share-oxfamjordan>

<sup>13</sup> Terriennes/AFP (2020), Tunisie: le 1809, le nouveau numéro gratuit pour les femmes violentées (Tunisia: 1809, the new toll-free number for abused women). In OECD (June 10, 2020). COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region: impact on gender equality and policy responses. Available on: <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/COVID-19-crisis-in-the-mena-region-impact-on-gender-equality-and-policy-responses-ee4cd4f4/>

<sup>14</sup> OECD (June 10, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Oxfam

<sup>16</sup> Spotlight Initiative (March 23, 2020). Key Messages: Violence Against Women And Covid-19.

Available on: [http://www.spotlightinitiative.org/sites/default/files/publication/Key\\_Messages\\_VAWG\\_and\\_COVID-19\\_Spotlight\\_Initiative\\_0.pdf](http://www.spotlightinitiative.org/sites/default/files/publication/Key_Messages_VAWG_and_COVID-19_Spotlight_Initiative_0.pdf)

health services<sup>17</sup> and abortion services<sup>18</sup>. For example in Slovakia, shortly after the outbreak, media reported that the Ministry of Health had issued a direction to healthcare providers, stating that abortions were not 'undelayable' and could be postponed.<sup>19</sup> Finally, movement restrictions are disrupting the ability of CSOs to support people who need them, much less provide critical lifesaving services.<sup>20</sup> "They do not know where to reach out to and we are unable to reach all those that need support."<sup>21</sup>

Addressing the root causes of violence (challenging underlying attitudes and patriarchal power inequalities) on the one hand<sup>22</sup>, and scaling up the support systems for reporting and responding to violence on the other hand<sup>23</sup>, both need to be part of any COVID-19 response. A systemic analysis on what constitutes a safe place and what intervention is necessary to provide this space needs to be conducted as part of this.

**Partners in Armenia are warning that the women's movement's hard work and progress during the recent years will regress, and that current isolation policies will strengthen gendered stereotypes and lead to an increasing socio-economic divide.<sup>24</sup>**

17 UNFPA (March 2020). Covid-19: A Gender Lens Protecting Sexual And Reproductive Health And Rights, And Promoting Gender Equality.

[https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19\\_A\\_Gender\\_Lens\\_Guidance\\_Note.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_A_Gender_Lens_Guidance_Note.pdf)

18 LSE (March 27, 2020). Abortion and COVID-19: why we need to support women's right to abortion in health emergencies. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/abortion-and-COVID-19/>

19 Sirotnikova, Miroslava (July 13, 2020). Right Power: Slovakia Mulls New Laws Limiting Abortion. BIRN. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/13/right-power-slovakia-mulls-new-laws-limiting-abortion/>

20 Spotlight Initiative (March 23, 2020).

21 Creaworld

22 Jan Reynders

23 Feminist Response to COVID-19: <https://www.feministCOVIDresponse.com/static/media/principles-en.a6f9f4a2.pdf>

24 Kvinna till Kvinna

## 2. Shrinking Civic Space

The COVID-19 pandemic has surfaced existing issues and fast-tracked prevailing challenges to civic freedoms. The CIVICUS Monitor shows that it has exacerbated the ongoing use of restrictive laws for civil society; restrictions on funding; attacks and acts of intimidation; the ongoing violent repression of mass mobilisations for change; and the wilful exclusion of civil society from decision making processes.<sup>25</sup>

There is evidence that such measures are being used to target Human Rights Defenders (HRDs),<sup>26</sup> and that Women's Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) are facing particular risks, due to 'targeted killings'.<sup>27</sup> For example, in Colombia Carlota Isabel Salinas Péres, leader of a women's rights organisation, was murdered on March 24 in her own home. Amnesty International reports that Peres was not able to move in order to stay out of reach of those persecuting her due to COVID-19 measures.<sup>28</sup> In El Salvador women's activists demanding a non-policing approach and the inclusion of women's voices have been silenced both through personal and online harassment.<sup>29</sup> "As feminist organisations we are at the forefront, so we have to be careful how to present ourselves because of a responsive government; many feminist activists I know have been arrested."<sup>30</sup>

Most detrimental has been the impact on the ability of CSOs and (W) HRDs to advocate for the issues they care about. In addition, "there is such a limit on freedom of information, that those working with marginalized groups are unable to provide an alternative point of view from what is

25 <https://monitor.civicus.org>

26 Frontline defenders (April 17, 2020). <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/defending-rights-during-pandemic-impact-covid-19-safety-and-work-human-rights>

27 United Nations (April 9, 2020). Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy\\_brief\\_on\\_COVID\\_impact\\_on\\_women\\_9\\_april\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_COVID_impact_on_women_9_april_2020.pdf). P.15

28 Amnesty International (March 26, 2020). Colombia: Measures against COVID-19 must not be an excuse for neglecting the protection of human rights defenders. <https://www.amnesty.ca/news/colombia-measures-against-COVID-19-must-not-be-excuse-neglecting-protection-human-rights>

29 Per interview conducted (Anonymous)

30 Creaworld

reported.”<sup>31</sup> Especially in times where people are stuck at home, it is essential that sources of information and stories being told also include a gender lens.

Respondents confirm that in countries such as Uganda, Kenya, India and Bangladesh,<sup>32</sup> governments use this time to further consolidate their position on gender equality while freedoms are severely curtailed ‘in the name of public health interventions.’ The Romanian parliament adopted – while in the middle of the pandemic – a bill to ban the mention of ‘gender identity’ across education. Despite a lockdown protest took place outside of Romania’s parliamentary building in Bucharest after the bill was announced. The new law is currently under consideration of the Romanian President.<sup>33</sup> In addition, in the midst of the crisis, Poland and Turkey are considering withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention on curbing domestic violence. In both countries women have rallied to demonstrate their support for the treaty.<sup>34</sup>

However, some see the current surfacing of oppression against feminist and women’s rights organisations as an opportunity to organize creatively and strategically to uphold human rights and gender justice. “Women’s rights and feminist organisations have been facing opposition anyway for years – this pandemic [just] visualizes it and provides more data on it.”<sup>35</sup>

31 ECNL

32 Creaworld and AWID

33 Byline Times (July 13,2020). The Latest Battle for the Future of Romania’s LGBTIQ Community.

<https://bylinetimes.com/2020/07/13/the-latest-battle-for-the-future-of-romania-s-lgbtqi-community/>

34 Santora, Mark (July 27, 2020). Poland Considers Leaving Treaty on Domestic Violence, Spurring Outcry. The New York Times; Tuysuz Gul (August 5, 2020). Turkish women rally against domestic violence as ruling party contemplates leaving key rights treaty. CNN.

35 AWID

## B. Policy and Donor Response

### 1. Political Support for Gender Equality

#### Countering GVB and Pushback on Gains

The gendered nature of the crisis has gained unprecedented media attention in some parts of the world.<sup>36</sup> Never before has the world, its international organisations and its policymakers acknowledged to such a public extent that a crisis results in increased GBV.<sup>37</sup>

The UN Secretary General’s speech on GBV calling for a “domestic violence ceasefire amid a horrifying global surge”,<sup>38</sup> had its impact and was, for example, shown on TV in Iraq with Arabic subtitles. “The video gave a sense of hope to women in their homes and was a strong message to Iraqi society. It was seen by many and was effective – how can we try to do more of this messaging or use creative animations and films to spread awareness?”<sup>39</sup> one peacebuilder asks.

Acknowledging that women and girls are locked up in their houses together with their perpetrator, in combination with increasing tensions and stress, has caused the French government to announce it would facilitate pop-up counselling centres in grocery stores,<sup>40</sup> the South African government to ensure access to shelters and to urgent protection,<sup>41</sup> and have induced limits to access to alcohol as part of movement restriction, recognizing it as an aggravating impact on violence in the home<sup>42</sup> and on rape.<sup>43</sup>

36 See, e.g.; Harrisberg, Kim, “With COVID-19, Women Around the World Are Being Evicted and Forced to Marry Male Relatives Hungry for Land,” Thomson Reuters Foundation, May 2020, <https://www.thedispatch.in/with-covid-19-women-around-the-world-are-being-evicted-and-forced-to-marry-male-relatives-hungry-for-land/>; Kottasová, Ivana, “Coronavirus is killing more men. But the lockdown is disastrous for women and their rights,” CNN, May 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/24/world/women-rights-coronavirus-intl/index.html>.

37 Examples include the UN Secretary General, UNDP, the French Government, the Spanish government, the African commission, the South African government.

38 UN News (April 6, 2020). UN chief calls for domestic violence ‘ceasefire’ amid ‘horrifying global surge’.

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>

39 Iraq Country Group Webinar – The Gendered Impact of Corona in Iraq

40 Time (March 31, 2020). French Government to House Domestic Abuse Victims in Hotels as Cases Rise During Coronavirus Lockdown. <https://time.com/5812990/france-domestic-violence-hotel-coronavirus/>

41 Parliamentary Monitoring Group (June 26, 2020). Minister on National Strategic Plan on Gender-based Violence and Femicide. <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/30547/>

42 Spotlight Initiative (March 23, 2020).

43 BBC (August 14, 2020). Coronavirus: South Africa crime rate plummets during lockdown. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53787846>

How much the knowledge of increased numbers of GBV has trickled down into securing funding from the COVID-19 response is unclear. The UN tracker on global COVID-19 responses shows that GBV is the most underfunded.<sup>44</sup> In the Dutch foreign response, as part of the initial 100 million euro provided to battle COVID-19, and the additional 150 million released on July 10th,<sup>45</sup> Dutch Minister for Trade and Development Aid, Sigrid Kaag pointed towards the GBV rise and called to “consequently [continue to] ask attention of women, girls and people in vulnerable positions.”<sup>46</sup> 75 million euros of the initial fund was dedicated to multilateral channels (World Health Organisation (WHO), Global Financing Facility (GFF) and the UN.<sup>47</sup> There is no indication that separate budgets were dedicated towards supporting gender equality and WHRDs. The Dutch current response still begs the question on how women's rights concretely be included in this funding.

Some positive funding examples can be found: In Canada, the COVID-19 response package includes \$50 million CAD (32 million EUR) to support shelters for women facing GBV; in Australia \$150m AUD (91 million EUR) of the national response was earmarked for family violence response; and in Mexico a law is being debated to transfer 405 million Mexican pesos (15 million EUR) to the National Network of Shelters.<sup>48</sup>

#### **Lack of a Feminist Lens in National Responses**

Overall, respondents report that after the first wave of attention, less prioritisation is now given to gender equality and GBV, there are fewer

articles in media, and therefore less pressure on decision makers.<sup>49</sup>

In addition, there is criticism that so far, these responses are too few and limited in scope, do not (yet) apply to conflict affected regions,<sup>50</sup> and often do not tackle root causes.

**“In South Africa we saw a decrease of GBV when sale of alcohol was temporarily banned, which is helpful. But should we not be talking about the causes of violence, as opposed to (only) its symptoms? Why do these men drink so much? Does drinking make these men violent, or is it their insecure socio-economic positions, the social pressures on them and their lack of training in communication? In order to be truly effective and gender transformative, we need to be looking at the intersectional root causes, but of course, without condoning their violent behaviour, be looking at the root causes.”<sup>51</sup>**

The Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy poses that “the response to the current pandemic is in dire need of feminist perspectives.”<sup>52</sup> In order to be effective, the national and coordinated multilateral policy, “must be rooted in systemic feminist analysis”<sup>53</sup> and must address the simultaneous health, humanitarian, care, economic and personal safety crises aggravated by the pandemic.<sup>54</sup>

44 OCHA (2020). COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan (Humanitarian response plan).

<https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/952/summary>

45 Volkskrant (July, 10th, 2020). Compromis over coronahulp voor ontwikkelingslanden.

46 Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (April, 14, 2020). Brief Van De Minister Voor Buitenlandse Handel En Ontwikkelingssamenwerking.

47 <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/downloads/document?id=b7d60e2d-127b-47d1-a252-7b72356b3e77&title=Kabinetsreactie%20op%20briefadvies%20nr.%2034%20Nederland%20en%20de%20wereldwijde%20aanpak%20van%20COVID-19%20van%20de%20AIV.docx>

48 United Nations (April 9, 2020).

49 As for example Kvinna till Kvinna on; <https://www.sparkblue.org/group/25/home/discussion/how-can-we-ensure-women-are-engaged-decision-making-response-COVID-19>

50 Cordaid

51 Jan Reynders

52 CFFP (2020). The response to Coronavirus is a feminist issue.

<https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/feminist-resources-on-the-pandemic>

53 Feminist Response To Covid-19 (2020).

54 Schalatek, Liane (2020). The invisible coronavirus makes systemic gender inequalities and injustices visible.

One development that the world has looked at as an example has been the Hawaiian COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan. The plan, produced by the state's Commission on the Status of Women, is designed for 'deep cultural change' by explicitly incorporating the unique needs of indigenous and immigrant women, caregivers, elderly women, femme-identifying and non-binary people, incarcerated women, unsheltered women, domestic abuse and sex trafficking survivors, and women with disabilities, hereby adopting an intersectional approach. It calls, among other things, for collection, analysis and publication of disaggregated data (gender, race/ethnicity, indigeneity, age, zip code, and social data) on the impact of COVID-19.<sup>55</sup> *More about its economic elements in chapter 4.*

## 2. Inclusion in the Response Debate

At a global and national level – despite being on the frontlines of the global healthcare response to COVID-19, and disproportionately affected and burdened – women and girls are largely missing from decision-making structures.<sup>56</sup> For the gendered discrepancy of COVID-19 effects to be included in responses, women and girls must be included in these processes.<sup>57</sup> Some positive stories on women's engagement have come out of Liberia and Lebanon, but in other countries this looks different. Through a survey of 30 countries CARE International found that countries that have more women in leadership,<sup>58</sup> are more likely to deliver COVID-19 responses that consider the effects of the crisis on women and girls. However, the majority of national-level committees established to respond to COVID-19 do not have equal female-male representation.<sup>59</sup> "There are

55 Hawai'i State Commission on the Status of Women (2020). Building Bridges, Not Walking on Backs: A Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for COVID-19 <https://humanservices.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/4.13.20-Final-Cover-D2-Feminist-Economic-Recovery-D1.pdf>

56 Global Health 50/50 (2020). The Global Health 50/50 Report 2020: Power, Privilege and Priorities. London, UK. <https://globalhealth5050.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Power-Privilege-and-Priorities-2020-Global-Health-5050-Report.pdf>

57 GAPS (2020). Call to Action: Now and the Future COVID-19 and Gender Equality, Global Peace and Security. <https://gaps-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Call-to-Action-Now-and-the-Future-COVID-19-and-WPS-1.pdf>

58 As measured by the Council on Foreign Relations Women's Power Index. The Council on Foreign Relations-created Women's Power Index (WPI) ranks 193 UN member states on their progress toward gender parity in political participation. The WPI measures the proportion of women who serve as heads of state or government, in cabinets, in national legislatures, as candidates for national legislatures, and in local government bodies, and visualizes the gender gap in political representation. <https://www.cfr.org/article/womens-power-index>.

59 Care (2020). WHERE ARE THE WOMEN? The Conspicuous Absence of Women in COVID-19 Response Teams and Plans, and Why We Need Them. [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CARE\\_COVID-19-womens-leadership-report\\_June-2020.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CARE_COVID-19-womens-leadership-report_June-2020.pdf)

currently committees, where women are completely neglected. [In Libya] members of these COVID-19 crises response include the mayor, head of the hospital, a person from the national disease control body, and some social affairs persons, and none of them are women."<sup>60</sup> Similar stories were shared for Palestine, Kenya and the Balkans.

Some new windows of opportunity for engagement have opened up as well. In the MENA region, for example, several governments (e.g. Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia) have been taking steps to integrate a gender perspective in the elaboration of their COVID-19 immediate responses, working closely with national women's organisations. These efforts could pave the way for the systematic adoption of gender mainstreaming in social and economic policies across the region in the long-term.<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, due to travel restrictions, women's organisations are increasingly being excluded from global debates in international fora, where they previously had a voice.

**"International political processes have become less transparent and less accessible to CSOs at UN level and in Brussels. It feels as if CSO engagement is becoming a check the box exercise."<sup>62</sup>**

It has become apparent that the engagement process in high level fora has become less transparent. Even though many of the high level fora (around CEDAW, the 20th anniversary of the 1325 agenda and adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action) have been cancelled or postponed, at policy level, conversations appear to have continued without the input of civil society (a core pillar of the Women, Peace and Security agenda). Some precedent has been set over the years for CSOs

60 NAP 1325 working group on Libya thematic session Zoom April 2002

61 OECD (June 10, 2020). COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region: impact on gender equality and policy responses.

62 Webinar WPS working group Syria

to participate at briefings, but this now happens a lot less.<sup>63</sup> There is less engagement from New York with local partners, causing some anxiety among CSOs that this may set a new precedent among high level actors.

That being said, the move to the virtual meeting world, has been an opportunity to engage those organisations that previously were not able to join live discussion fora due to visa restrictions. "Limitations previously mentioned as reasons why women could not participate in certain dialogues are gone, so it now comes down to the question: Do you want to include them or not?"<sup>64</sup> This argument can be leveraged to increase virtual participation also of grassroots groups.

*(Please see chapter 2B2 for more information on how this affects the Women, Peace and Security agenda.)*

### 3. Financial Support and Flexibility of Funds

A study conducted by AWID in 2015 clarifies the needed support for grassroots organisations and links to the current situation. It found that while women and girls were a priority in nearly every funding sector, support for 'the roots' of this work – the collective action by feminists and WHRDs – was largely lacking.<sup>65</sup> Of the 1000 organisation sample they applied, many organisations reported having had to cut activities due to funding limitations and were primarily reliant on project support rather than on long term flexible funding.<sup>66</sup> A recommendation included that the provision of flexible, multi-year and core funding [is key] to allow flexibility to respond to changing circumstances. This recommendation for flexible funding could not be more applicable than to the current COVID-19 crisis.

63 Cordaid, Oxfam

64 Cordaid

65 AWID (2013). Watering the Leaves, Starving the Roots:

The Status of Financing for Women's Rights Organizing and Gender Equality.

[https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/WTL\\_Starving\\_Roots.pdf](https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/WTL_Starving_Roots.pdf)

66 Ibid

**"The provision of flexible, multi-year and core funding [is key] to allow flexibility to respond to changing circumstances, which ultimately enhances impact."<sup>67</sup>**

Respondents in this study report a mixed bag of donor and funder behaviour during the crisis. Some reiterated commitments to flexible gender equality funding were made. Most notably, from SIDA, the Wallace Global Fund<sup>68</sup> and the Ford Foundation,<sup>69</sup> who have reportedly worked closely with local women's organisations to understand their needs to provide them with the required flexibility to navigate the evolving situation.

Ford was also part of the Global Resilience Fund for Girls and Young Women launched as a collective response to the COVID-19 crisis, providing flexible funding prioritising registered and unregistered community organisations and informal collectives led by young women and/or trans and intersex youth with incomes of below \$50,000 per year (42 thousand EUR), from a pool of 22 funds.<sup>70</sup>

However, many commitments have not been transformed yet into increased or flexible funding mechanisms. In fact, interviews for this report suggest that, funding from large organisations slowly appears to be decreasing or changing in form. As one respondent puts it: "No emergency funds in any of the regions have been satisfactory in providing relevant gendered support to respond to the wider impact of COVID-19.

67 Ibid, p25

68 Wallace Global Fund (2020). Wallace Global Fund's COVID-19 Emergency Response.

<http://wgf.org/wallace-global-fund-awards-1m-to-covid-19-response-will-pay-out-20-of-assets-in-2020-as-movement-grows-within-philanthropy-to-spend-more-1/>

69 Ford Foundation (2020). Our Response to the Coronavirus.

<https://www.fordfoundation.org/campaigns/our-response-to-the-coronavirus/>

70 Includes Central American Women's Fund, FIMI – The International Indigenous Women's Fund, the Ford Foundation, Plan International, the Ukrainian Women's Fund, UNICEF and Women Enabled International. More information here: <https://seaif.org/communications/press-releases/launch-of-the-global-resilience-fund-for-girls-and-young-women-a-collective-response-to-the-covid-19-crisis/>

The experience of ebola in West Africa suggested that funding and resources are likely to be diverted away from areas like SRHR in crises like this. In Lebanon, partner organisations see a trend to divert funds from movement building and advocacy to crisis response.<sup>71</sup>

In addition key philanthropic funds for gender equality have been downsized due to “financial uncertainties”, most notably 36 layoffs and major cuts for GBV at the NoVo Foundation, responsible for 17 percent of women's rights funding in the US.<sup>72</sup> This lack of sustainable funding has led some to ask “whether it is time to fix the systems that produces these hoarders of massive amounts of resources, who can turn on a dime and walk away from us at any moment?”<sup>73</sup>

#### **What does a sustainable and flexible funding system need to look like?**

A critical lesson from previous public health emergencies such as cholera and ebola must inform our response to COVID-19: “have more flexible and adaptable funding and grants management mechanisms... to allow for rapid adjustments to the response as the virus evolves and its impacts are better understood.”<sup>74</sup> So what does a sustainable and flexible new funding system look like?

First, more funding needs to be committed towards core funding for local Women's Rights Organisations (WROs) from multi-year government funds so to prevent dependence on philanthropists. WROs find themselves left in the vulnerable position of having to respond directly, without adequate financial support to do so.<sup>75</sup>

71 Kvinna till Kvinna

72 Philanthropy Women (May 28, 2020). NoVo Accounted for 17% of US Funding for Women's Rights. <https://philanthropywomen.org/feminist-strategy/funding-womens-rights/>

73 Philanthropy Women (May 13, 2020). As NoVo Downsizes, What Next for Women and Girls? <https://philanthropywomen.org/feminist-strategy/as-novo-downsizes-what-next-women-girls/>

74 Care (2020). Care COVID-19 Advocacy Position Paper.

<https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/publications/care-COVID-19-advocacy-position-paper>

75 Hivos, Awid, Kvinna till Kvinna, Care.

The funding then needs to be earmarked more flexibly. “Priorities shift sometimes daily so we need to be able to adapt to respond to the biggest needs.”<sup>76</sup> Allowing for on the spot adaptation, based on the needs of the community would considerably change the effectiveness of the funding system in times of crisis. Flexible funding allows for leveraging women's organisations' capacities.

Third, there is evidence that funding earmarked for rapid COVID-19 response is not reaching front liners. One of the major reasons for this is linked to bureaucratic processes around application requirements that many grassroots organisations cannot comply with or meet the threshold of. “You talk about supporting grassroots WHRDs and then you see the calls for proposals for millions of dollars; many grassroots organisations cannot apply for millions of dollars, this simply does not match the commitment to work with WHRDs.”<sup>77</sup> In addition, there is some anecdotal evidence that grants were not distributed to organisations considered ‘too far to monitor’. (See Chapter 2 on Gender, Peace and Security)

**“Quite simply, there are organisations on the ground that are ready to scale up their responses with agility and speed before the situation becomes worse. With the adequate resources in place, we believe they can do this far better than through expensive layers of external actors, most of whom will now have virtually no presence or relationships in the countries they intend to serve.”<sup>78</sup>**

76 AWID

77 WIPC

78 Devex Editor (April 23, 2020). Opinion: ‘Accelerate your commitments’ during COVID-19 – an open letter to donors. <https://www.devex.com/news/opinion-accelerate-your-commitments-during-COVID-19-an-open-letter-to-donors-97069>

Fourth, a rethink on building partnerships between North and South based organisations may be relevant during this crisis, especially now that international organisations have largely returned to their home communities. “Every organisation applying for Dutch funding will now have to be very creative and focus on what is really needed. Due to travel restrictions, they simply cannot reach the communities without local groups, who are doing the actual work. Why don't we more strongly pose the question how Northern based, more expensive, organisations add value in these development processes, with so many well trained and experienced local organisations ... who are often obliged to implement the agendas of the northern organisations, rather than their own?”<sup>79</sup>

## C. CSO Response

### 1. Higher Workload and Shift of Priorities

All 17 respondents interviewed for this report shared that the workload of local gender equality organisations and WHRDs has gone up exponentially. For many WHRDs, work has been challenged as they cannot gather with the communities of women and girls and gender non-conform persons they support on the ground.

As a result, some share, the larger picture – such as government accountability- sometimes remains unaddressed.

**“Some partners have started to handle direct aid in their communities, not because they are humanitarian organisations but because they know what is needed, and sometimes it gives them a new respect and visibility in a society that before would, at best, ignore them.”<sup>80</sup>**

<sup>79</sup> Jan Reynders  
<sup>80</sup> Kvinna till Kvinna

However, opportunities also present themselves as several WHRDs in Kenya, Uganda, Bangladesh and India for example, have invested their time documenting the violations taking place against women and girls, and developing strategies for the future.<sup>81</sup> “We have utilized this opportunity to do more research on GBV to submit a report to the Special Rapporteur on GBV working with nine partners in India, Kenya and Uganda.”<sup>82</sup>

### 2. Inequality Engagement between CSOs

The crisis has surfaced further inequality between the capacity and access of smaller organisations and larger international civil society organisations. Differences can be seen in the digital divide, in the urban-rural divide, and the small-large divide. Some organisations have great virtual access and others have become completely disconnected from the debate.<sup>83</sup>

However, online initiatives have been mushrooming so there is an opportunity to tap into. Virtual security will have to be considered so that all organisations, big or small, digitize without increasing risk. There is an ongoing issue of funding streaming through larger NGOs or capital based CSOs. Those at the margins, like diaspora organisations, are being squeezed further for funds.<sup>84</sup> All of this is perpetuating the status quo on who has a voice and who does not. There is a role to play for larger organisations to continue building and showing trust towards smaller partners to ensure their perspective is included.

### 3. Coalition Building

Partner organisations working on women's rights in all regions are advocating to ensure a gender perspective and include CSOs in the

<sup>81</sup> Shelter City (2020). Louisa And Asha – Sharing Experiences As Hrds In Nigeria And India During Covid-19 Pandemic. <https://sheltercity.nl/en/louisa-and-asha-sharing-experiences-as-hrds-in-nigeria-and-india-during-COVID-19-pandemic/>

<sup>82</sup> Creaworld

<sup>83</sup> Oxfam and Cordaid

<sup>84</sup> As per interview (Anonymous)

COVID-19 response, through analyses, statements, reports, briefs, recommendations, and meetings. Though there have been many, four responses are worth mentioning.

First, a joint statement was made at the 44th Session of the UN Human Rights Council, Interactive Dialogue with the High Commissioner for Human Rights, calling to not allow emergency responses to undermine democratic gains.<sup>85</sup>

Second, the Call for a Feminist Response to COVID-19, reiterates that “now more than ever, policy, strategy and response must be rooted in systemic feminist analysis, and guided by feminist principles.”<sup>86</sup> Specifically, it states six key principles of what encompasses a feminist response, including considering the intersectionality of the response, the consideration of SRHR, adequate and equitable financing, strengthening democratic values, a just and equitable transition and guidance by cooperation. It was signed by over forty individuals and organisations including FEMNET, WECF and the Feminist Task Force.<sup>87</sup>

Thirdly, a statement drafted by the Count Me In Consortium (CMI!), existing of Mama Cash, AWID, CREA, and others, urgently call to ensure that inequalities are not reinforced. Specifically, it recommends governments to 1) Treat GBV services as essential and fund WROs to address the increase now; 2) Protect and sustain WHRDs and the work of feminist movements; 3) Ensure that funding commitments in support of women's rights are at the centre of forward looking plans; 4) Increase the number of women in decision-making on all aspects of the COVID-19; and 5) Ensure all new and existing macro-economic policies work for people and planet.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Including by the Civic Space Initiative, CIVICUS, Article 19, ICNL, ECNL and the World Movement for Democracy. <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/united-nations/geneva/4487-upholding-fundamental-rights-is-crucial-for-global-crisis-response>

<sup>86</sup> Feminist Response To Covid-19 (2020).

<sup>87</sup> Feminist Response To Covid-19 (2020).

<sup>88</sup> CMI! (June 1, 2020). CMI! Recommendations on COVID-19 and women's human rights. <https://www.mamacash.org/en/cmi-recommendations-on-COVID-19-and-women-s-human-rights>

And fourth, the Statement of Feminists and Women's Rights Organisations from the Global South and marginalized communities in the Global North- was endorsed by nearly 1160 individuals and women's networks and organisations globally, from 100 countries, to demand States to adopt a feminist policy to address the extraordinary challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in a manner that is consistent with human rights standards and principles. Key Focus Areas for a Feminist Policy on COVID-19 include health, food security, education, economic inequality, GBV, access to information and abuse of power.<sup>89</sup>

## Recommendations to the Government of the Netherlands

### 1. Ensure that the Dutch COVID-19 response and recovery plan is based on feminist and intersectional principles and centralizes gender equality and women's rights.

- A. Take into consideration the multi-dimensional and intersecting forms of inequalities, discrimination and marginalisation.
- B. Treat GBV services as essential and fund WROs to address the increase. Protection services (such as hotlines, safe spaces, refuge) must be funded and easily accessible to account for the increases in Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and must include funding for organisations delivering essential safe spaces and support services.<sup>90</sup>
- C. Clarify how concretely, Dutch recovery funding will be dedicated (trickle down) to women's rights, gender equality and WHRDs in the foreign response.

<sup>89</sup> CEJIL (June 1, 2020). Statement of Feminists and Women's Rights Organisations from the Global South and marginalized communities in the Global North. <https://www.cejil.org/en/statement-feminists-and-womens-rights-organisations-global-south-and-marginalized-communities-global>

<sup>90</sup> GAPS (2020). Call to Action

**2. Actively advocate and invest to keep women's rights and gender equality as a priority on the international agendas in and beyond the COVID-19 recovery plans.**

- A.** Dedicate more funding to feminist grant-making and particularly to core funding of WROs.
- B.** Actively advocate that COVID-19 responses must be based on feminist principles and take into consideration the multi-dimensional and intersecting forms of inequalities, discrimination and marginalisation that puts particular groups of people at increased risk;
- C.** Ensure COVID-19 and associated coordination and planning platforms are gender balanced by proposing a gender equality quota to COVID-19-related decision-making bodies and processes. Ensure meaningful participation in these by making deliberate efforts to create conditions conducive to women confidently and safely speaking out and contributing their views and expertise.
- D.** Invest in sex-disaggregated data collection, capacity building on sex-disaggregated data collection and stimulate knowledge exchange on data collection between countries.

**3. Provide Flexible Funding Mechanisms so to allow for the leveraging of women's organisations' capacities.**

- A.** Donors and international organisations should sustain and increase financial support to and partnership with HRDs and WHRDs during this crisis: combine rapid response or ad hoc funds with long term funding, with an eye on sustainability;
- B.** Allow organisations to be flexible in spending their funding so to adapt to the immediate needs and situation on the ground. Ensure that budgets can be reviewed and adapted on a yearly basis;

- C.** Focus on lifting the barriers on direct funding of WHRDs – ensure a fund for WHRDs is made available, create a separate “window” for gender justice at embassies (so that local WHRDs can gain direct access) and decrease the administration and bureaucracy around smaller funds to make these accessible for grassroots WHRDs.

**4. 'Walk the talk' when it comes to civic space by pro-actively recognizing the equal role of HRDs and WHRDs in international and national fora and being vocal on shrinking space.**

- A.** Be vocal about shrinking civic space and ensure protection of HRDs and WHRDs. In international fora, there is a need for leadership on this<sup>91</sup> by explicitly and pro-actively recognizing their equal role in international and national fora and through Embassies. Assure a strong voice on women's rights and gender equality also comes from high level positions, such as the Ambassador.
- B.** Undertake thorough human rights impact assessments to ensure that measures in response to the crisis do not infringe human rights and fundamental freedoms.
- C.** Publicly speak out about and dedicate specific budgets towards curbing the worrying trend of CSO exclusion from international fora and harness the potential around the digital divide and digitization.

<sup>91</sup> As per interviews conducted

# 3. Gender, Peace, and Security

Equal participation of women, men, gender non-conforming persons and youth in peace processes and the prevention of conflicts, is one of WO=MEN's three focus areas.<sup>92</sup> This chapter summarizes the main impacts on, policy trends in and responses to the work done within the Women (or more broadly the 'Gender') Peace and Security (GPS) agenda.

<sup>92</sup> <https://wo-men.nl/en/what-we-do/gender-peace-and-security>

### A. Impacts of COVID-19

#### 1. Conflict Dynamics

COVID-19 and the response to it are changing –and in some cases exacerbating- conflict dynamics and existing patterns of inequality, interrupting peace processes, and increasing the risk of violence in communities. For example, in Afghanistan, the peace process has been put under additional pressure, with no sign of a ceasefire,<sup>93</sup> in Colombia people are edged between COVID-19 measures and the conflict between guerrillas, paramilitary groups and the army,<sup>94</sup> and in Iraq, ISIS has taken the opportunity to mobilise and strengthen its forces.<sup>95</sup> In South Sudan, Somalia, Kenya, Cameroon, and DRC, important peacebuilding dialogues have been cancelled. Local peacebuilders report significant impacts on the conflict dynamics in their communities across the globe.<sup>96</sup>

Local and external conflict parties are reported to “capitalise on various opportunities arising from the policy responses to the crisis which complicate peace and crisis management efforts.”<sup>97</sup> As an example, in Western Africa, violence by non-state armed groups was over 50 percent higher between 23 March and 25 April than the monthly average.<sup>98</sup> In addition, the policy response has made way for autocratic state actors to

93 Oxfam (2020). Conflict in the Time of Coronavirus. Why a global ceasefire could offer a window of opportunity for inclusive, locally-led peace. <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620983/bp-conflict-coronavirus-global-ceasefire-120520-en.pdf>

94 WOLA (April 10, 2020). COVID-19 and Human Rights in Colombia. <https://www.wola.org/2020/04/april-2020-colombia-urgent-action/>

95 NBC News (May 28, 2020). ISIS is using coronavirus to rebuild its terrorism network in Iraq and Syria. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/isis-using-coronavirus-rebuild-its-terrorism-network-iraq-syria-ncna1215941>

96 Humanity United (2020). COVID-19 and the impact on local peacebuilding. [https://humanityunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/p4d-covid-19-report\\_final.pdf](https://humanityunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/p4d-covid-19-report_final.pdf)

97 EU ISS (2020). From Bad To Worse? The impact(s) of Covid-19 on conflict dynamics. p. 2.

<https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%2013%20COVID%20and%20conflict.pdf>

98 ACLED, “Armed violence dashboard”, 2020, <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>

act towards civil actors. Examples include Iran’s Revolutionary Guard and South African troops, which have all played an active role in combating the pandemic. As one respondent puts it: “This prominent military role during the crisis can strengthen its power vis-à-vis civilian leaders,”<sup>99</sup> hereby shifting the dynamic of power.

Considering that about 70 percent of global health workers are women and women’s networks and organisations are key partners in UN peacekeeping, women’s networks have been critical vehicles for women’s participation in COVID-19 responses and elevated advocacy for the global ceasefire call.<sup>100</sup> (More about this in section C). Parties to conflicts in Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Colombia, Libya, Myanmar, the Philippines, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen have stated in April 2020<sup>101</sup> to be willing to comply with the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General’s call for a global ceasefire, called in April of 2020.<sup>102</sup> The Security Council echoed this call in June with the adoption of Resolution 2532,<sup>103</sup> calling upon all parties to armed conflicts to immediately engage in a ‘durable humanitarian pause’ of at least 90 days, to enable the safe, unhindered and sustained delivery of lifesaving aid. It has requested the Secretary-General to instruct the UN’s 13 peacekeeping missions to support host country efforts to contain the coronavirus, and to provide updates on UN efforts to address the pandemic in conflict zones and humanitarian crisis areas.

99 EU ISS (2020).

100 Africa Renewal (April 22, 2020). COVID-19: A double burden for women in conflict areas, on the frontline. <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/web-features/coronavirus/COVID-19-double-burden-women-conflict-areas-frontline>

101 United Nations (April 9, 2020). Update on the Secretary-General’s Appeal for a Global Ceasefire. [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/update\\_on\\_sg\\_appeal\\_for\\_ceasefire\\_april\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/update_on_sg_appeal_for_ceasefire_april_2020.pdf)

102 United Nations (2020). The fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war.

<https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/fury-virus-illustrates-folly-war>

103 United Nations News (July 1, 2020). Stalled Security Council resolution adopted, backing UN’s global humanitarian ceasefire call. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1067552>

## 2. Exposing Vulnerabilities & Inequalities

The global economic devastation caused by the coronavirus is “going to be felt most acutely by the people already living in the margins, including the two billion people living in fragile and conflict-affected states.”<sup>104</sup> Many regions facing severe food crises – the Sahel, Yemen, Venezuela, South Sudan, for example – are simultaneously experiencing violent conflict.<sup>105</sup> Among these communities, “women and girls, and those intersecting with other ‘vulnerable’ identities, are hit the hardest. We know from ebola how the risks of COVID-19 are gendered.”<sup>106</sup> COVID-19 outbreaks in development contexts could disproportionately affect women and girls in a number of ways, including adverse effects on their education, food security and nutrition, health, livelihoods, and protection.<sup>107</sup>

Most notably, emerging evidence suggests that incidents of GBV have increased exponentially since the outbreak of COVID-19 in areas of conflict<sup>108</sup> (and overall across the world<sup>109</sup>). Women and girls, marginalized groups, including LGBTQI, are particularly at risk.<sup>110</sup> In a reference to his appeals for a global ceasefire in conflicts around the world, the UN Secretary-General pointed out that “for many women and girls, the threat looms largest where they should be safest: in their own homes.”<sup>111</sup> As one respondent illustrates: “GBV is increasing because already traumatized people lack work and are even more easily agitated.”<sup>112</sup> A woman peace

104 OCHA. (2019). Global Humanitarian Overview 2019.

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/GHO2019.pdf>

105 Oxfam (2020). Conflict in the Time of Coronavirus. Why a global ceasefire could offer a window of opportunity for inclusive, locally-led peace, p.7.

106 Oxfam

107 Care (2020). Gender Implications of covid-19. <https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/publications/gender-implications-of-covid-19-outbreaks-in-development-and-humanitarian-settings>

108 All 17 respondents interviewed for this study listed GBV increase as one of the main impacts of COVID-19 for the women’s rights agenda both in conflict, post conflict societies and beyond.

109 In France, for example, reports of domestic violence have increased by 30 percent since the lockdown started, and in Argentina emergency calls about domestic violence have increased by 25 percent since its lockdown started on 20 March. Many other countries have reported such increases. [https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2020/may/20200519\\_gender-based-violenceCOVID19](https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2020/may/20200519_gender-based-violenceCOVID19)

110 Care (2020). Gender Implications of covid-19.

111 United Nations (April 6, 2020). UN chief calls for domestic violence ‘ceasefire’ amid ‘horrifying global surge’.

112 WIPC

builder shares: “In one camp in South Darfur, one of the largest in the world, we see so many rape cases. Young people who are offsprings out of these rapes are floating around in these camps and have nowhere to go, and without education. Simultaneously, girls are missing school because they don’t have hygiene items.”<sup>113</sup> Even though there are some initial positive trends in donor’s response to GBV, they have been limited in scope, and do not (yet) apply to conflict affected regions.<sup>114</sup> (see *Chapter 2.B.1 for more information*).

## 3. Pushback on Gains: Implementation and Momentum of the GPS Agenda

Important steps were made in the past years to realize peace in countries such as Afghanistan, Colombia, Yemen and South Sudan. However, the restrictions on gatherings and closures of embassies in many conflict-affected countries risk destabilizing ongoing efforts.<sup>115</sup> Because women are often at the forefront of addressing crises, be it as humanitarian actors, building social cohesion or negotiating peace, restrictions are showing to already impede women in carrying out their work and putting them at additional risk.<sup>116</sup> This is not only the case for the work of first responders, but also of Women, Peace and Security (WPS) activists, who are often dependant on NGOs, embassies or the UN to participate in peace talks and meetings.

### Civic Space Restrictions

First, increased government restrictions limit women peace builders from practically conducting their work (more details about this can be found in chapter 2). One report, based on consultations with 400 peacebuilders, suggests that some governments are exploiting the crisis to further

113 Vond Foundation

114 Cordaid

115 Oxfam (2020). Conflict in the Time of Coronavirus. Why a global ceasefire could offer a window of opportunity for inclusive, locally-led peace, p.12 <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620983/bp-conflict-coronavirus-global-ceasefire-120520-en.pdf>

116 Oxfam (2020), p. 44

restrict civil society space and increase authoritarian measures.<sup>117</sup> Some local peacebuilders fear that it will be difficult to reclaim this space after the crisis: “beyond just financial resources, I fear that this crisis can be used by some to curtail civic space, [particularly] the protection of young peacebuilders is made more difficult due to travel restrictions.”<sup>118</sup> For example, in Colombia national CSOs report that armed groups use the heightened insecurity to target human rights defenders, many of whom are indigenous and Afro-Colombian women. According to one human rights advocate: “Despite the national quarantine in Colombia, killings of social leaders continue and have become more targeted.”<sup>119</sup> One concern that is raised linked to these trends, is that under these circumstances, also the safe space to engage with policy makers can no longer be created and lobby and advocacy activities will be difficult to implement.

#### Participation in Dialogue on WPS

Aside from physical threats to women peace builders, there is a perceived threat to one of the key pillars of the global Gender or Women, Peace and Security agenda: the participation of women in the international and national dialogue on peace and security, including on the crisis response. Local peacebuilding efforts, which often rely on in-person gatherings and people-to-people approaches, are directly undermined by restrictions on gatherings. As the NGO Working Group on WPS notes, “supporting women’s full, equal, and meaningful participation is as critical in peace and security processes as it is in addressing the current pandemic”.<sup>120</sup> At an international level, women’s and girls’ voices – especially those that are most marginalized and of smaller organisations – are falling through the cracks.

<sup>117</sup> Humanity United (2020). COVID-19 and the impact on local peacebuilding.

<sup>118</sup> As quoted in report by Humanity United (2020): [https://humanityunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/p4d-COVID-19-report\\_final.pdf](https://humanityunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/p4d-COVID-19-report_final.pdf)

<sup>119</sup> Oxfam (2020). P. 10, referenced from <https://www.wola.org/2020/04/april-2020-colombia-urgent-action/>

<sup>120</sup> NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security. Monthly Action Points, April, 2020. [https://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/files/NGOWG\\_MAP-April-2020.pdf](https://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/files/NGOWG_MAP-April-2020.pdf)

**“We cannot get women to places where they can share their story anymore [e.g. UN level meetings]. Face to face meetings are so important to bring women peace builders’ voice across, but voices from the field have very little access now. We are not yet sure what the consequences will be of this.”<sup>121</sup>**

Some national governments, such as the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, have organised webinars<sup>122</sup> with peace builders online. However, through these engagements the digital divide is increasingly showing (*also see next section and Chapter 2*). For bigger organisations with good internet access, these are accessible and provide an opportunity to engage. “However, looking at this from an intersectional perspective, the marginalized parties without access are falling even further behind.”<sup>123</sup>

#### Momentum of the WPS Agenda

Finally, there is a perceived effect on GPS and WPS activities and its momentum. Overall, peacebuilders are struggling to sustain their work during this period. We have observed a pushback on improvements previously made on women’s leadership. “In our usual strategies we encourage women to remain in school to get them into higher decision making positions. This is not possible now because girls are at home doing housework, being forced into marriages and others are being raped. We see a pushback on gains already made on girls education, also those made on child marriage and pregnancy rates.”<sup>124</sup> “Our partners share that women have increasingly become used to going out to work and earning

<sup>121</sup> Cordaid

<sup>122</sup> Live webinar: Connected or muted? New opportunities for women’s participation in peace processes during the Covid-19 pandemic, April 4, 2020. <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/live-webinar-connected-or-muted/id2700786/>

<sup>123</sup> Kvinna till Kvinna

<sup>124</sup> WIPC

an income; if this lockdown lasts longer this social norm may change back to the belief that women should stay at home.”<sup>125</sup>

A contributing factor that is limiting the work is that few local organisations have access to gender disaggregated data. “It is very difficult to respond without this. We see women doing more care work and house-work, but hard numbers are lacking.”<sup>126</sup> This data may be particularly relevant in relation to effects on the work of WPS activists, because being able to go to an office with the right facilities (internet, computer, no children that need continuous attention), is often the only way they can actually implement their work. Finally, with priorities shifting to COVID-19, local peacebuilders fear reductions in financial support and attention from international donors.<sup>127</sup>

## B. Policy and Donor Response

### 1. The WPS Framework as an Opportunity

When the crisis hit, questions on whether and how the WPS agenda was either relevant or a priority -amid the health focused activities- rose from different fora. For example, in South Sudan, donors initially shared to have to halt peace building activities and instead focus on COVID-19.<sup>128</sup> In response, local organisations continuously emphasized the relationship between corona and conflict to donors. Eventually, multiple actors started to embrace the idea that, if used well, the WPS Framework could actually be very applicable to this crisis. Some have suggested that “the WPS agenda has never been more relevant than now...the COVID-19 pandemic, is, in fact, proving the centrality of the WPS agenda.”<sup>129</sup>

<sup>125</sup> Oxfam

<sup>126</sup> Kvinna till Kvinna

<sup>127</sup> [https://humanityunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/p4d-COVID-19-report\\_final.pdf](https://humanityunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/p4d-COVID-19-report_final.pdf)

<sup>128</sup> Oxfam

<sup>129</sup> NATO (May 12, 2020). COVID-19: at the Heart of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda – Reflections on the Gendered Impacts of the Pandemic. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_175694.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_175694.htm)

**COVID-19 has “opened the Pandora’s box” and has surfaced inequalities and issues that the WPS community has been talking about for years. “The WPS agenda has never been more relevant than at this time of crisis...the pandemic, with its multifaceted security dimensions, is, in fact, proving the centrality of the WPS agenda to contemporary global security challenges.”<sup>130</sup>**

Elements of the agenda that they refer to here include the gendered analyses of the causes and consequences of crises, women’s participation and agency in conflict prevention, peacebuilding and decision making, and new ways of looking at security. This includes shifts in priorities, resource allocation, and skill sets that put the needs of both women and men at the core of what is meant by security in any given society.<sup>131</sup> These statements provide an opportunity for the women’s movement to keep WPS a priority focus on national agendas.

### 2. Lack of Engagement with Policymakers at High Level Fora

Even though a trend of de-prioritization of the WPS agenda cannot be clearly proven, it has become apparent that at the international level the engagement process around it in high level fora has become less transparent. (See section 2.B.2 for more information).

At a national level, UN’s Peace Operations Chief, Jean Pierre Lacroix – against the background that peacebuilding missions have significantly strengthened women’s partnerships- perceives the coronavirus’ disruption to these meetings as ‘one of the pandemic’s thorns’. “It has disrupted their direct engagement with policymakers, political leaders and each other.”<sup>132</sup>

<sup>130</sup> Ibid

<sup>131</sup> Ibid

<sup>132</sup> As shared by UN Peace Operations chief, Jean-Pierre Lacroix. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/06/1066162>

However, he stresses that missions' close relationships with women's organisations have allowed them to "quickly and creatively continue to work through UN assets" –via radio and community alert systems – as well as by leveraging women-led structures.<sup>133</sup>

### 3. Funding Availability for Women Peacebuilders

There is some indication from the ground that COVID-19 is causing elements of the WPS agenda to be de-funded. Larger international CSOs share that defunding is not clear yet, however, some stories from partners of dropped applications are worrying. The largest parts of budgets are now refocused on health and military (humanitarian) response, leaving little room for justice work, including GBV.<sup>134</sup>

**“We have only one woman working in each municipality. Without organisations working on WPS, we will not be able to raise issues like GBV, and issues related to gender at all. We find it a concern that from a donor perspective there is a tendency to divert funds to emergency needs. We need to have a conversation about what tht means for [sustainably] working on WPS.”<sup>135</sup>**

Overall, front liners and grassroots organisations appear to have less access to funds and, more importantly, to appropriate funds. Organisations in MENA and the Balkans share that they will need more funds to respond better. “Budgets have shifted, we see some calls introduced on COVID-19 that are at the expense of WPS activities.”<sup>136</sup> It is

<sup>133</sup> Ibid

<sup>134</sup> Cordaid

<sup>135</sup> Libya NAP 1325 Working Group

<sup>136</sup> Vond Foundation

exactly now that a globally coordinated response needs to be founded on and led by communities and local responders that are trusted and seen as representative, but local dynamics and capabilities appear not to be considered sufficiently by international donors. Matching funding for their efforts has therefore also not appeared.”<sup>137</sup>

In addition, interactions by donors with WHRDs locally appears to often be limited to those organisations based in the capital. “The largest conflict areas are still in biggest needs; women are suffering there. The French launched a funding call for peace activities in March and partners submitted. When asked about their location [1000km from Khartoum], it was considered too far to monitor.”<sup>138</sup>

Finally, there is worry about donors' ability to be flexible around funds. Where some donors have been open to adaptation and understand flexibility is needed to meet the needs of communities, others request justification about the activity shifts, to which smaller organisations cannot always respond.<sup>139</sup> It would be valuable if donors rethink how they can limit the bureaucracy around funds, account for flexibility and bridge the gap between government and grassroots work. *(Find more on flexibility of funds in 2.B.3).*

## C. CSO Response

### 1. Higher workload and Shift of Priorities

Across the board, CSOs are adjusting to serve the needs of the communities they work in. WHRDs are not dropping the WPS lens in their work, they instead integrate COVID-19 response activities into their WPS response.<sup>140</sup> “Our focus hasn't changed necessarily; what we are seeing is that COVID-19 is just one of the crises around WPS. We now need to

<sup>137</sup> Oxfam Report (2020), Cordaid, WIPC

<sup>138</sup> Vond Foundation

<sup>139</sup> WIPC, Vond, and Cordaid

<sup>140</sup> Oxfam

ensure we mainstream a COVID-19 response in all we do.”<sup>141</sup> Combining activities means a higher workload for all, without new money coming in.<sup>142</sup> Smaller organisations in particular appear to adapt quicker than the larger ones in the capitals, that have to await approval from international head offices. Organisations are moving into neighbourhoods voluntarily to raise awareness on issues that are deemed important for stability as well as COVID-19 control. Respondents report that work is predominantly added in the fields of WASH, GBV, youth and migrants. For example, partners have added hand-washing and sanitary products campaigns,<sup>143</sup> youth engagement and a focus on Resolutions 2250,<sup>144</sup> GBV hotlines and chat services<sup>145</sup> and work to supporting migrants in IDP camps.<sup>146</sup>

From Yemen to Iraq to Libya, women peace builders are able to tailor messaging to their local audiences through online platforms and local media, given each of their familiarity with local contexts and cultures.<sup>147</sup> In short, local peacebuilders are essential to the recovery process, they can inform and improve interventions and their inclusion in the assessment of each context, decision making, design and delivery is critical.

**“Some donors asked why we are now providing food: In our work we see that women and girls are dying of hunger so we have to act. Donors cannot assume the needs of women and girls right now. They need to find out from those working on the ground. It is food they need, not only advocacy [on WPS].”<sup>148</sup>**

<sup>141</sup> WIPC

<sup>142</sup> Kvinna till Kvinna, Oxfam, Cordaid

<sup>143</sup> Cordaid, WIPC

<sup>144</sup> Vond Foundation

<sup>145</sup> Kvinna till Kvinna

<sup>146</sup> Vond Foundation

<sup>147</sup> LSE (March 25, 2020). Women peace and security in the time of corona. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2020/03/25/women-peace-and-security-in-the-time-of-corona/>

<sup>148</sup> WIPC

## 2. Inequality Engagement between CSOs

The crisis has surfaced further inequality between the capacity and access of smaller organisations and larger international civil society organisations. Differences can be seen in the digital divide, in the urban-rural divide, and the small-large divide. Some organisations have great virtual access and others have become completely disconnected from the debate.<sup>149</sup> (See Section 2C2 for more information).

## 3. Coalition Building

CSOs working on gender equality and women’s rights have –since the start of the crisis- mobilized intensively to issue statements on gendered impacts of the virus. “At least now organisations feel the need of working together, so it brings them closer. The sense of competition is slowly disappearing.”<sup>150</sup> Though there have been many statements, we highlight two in relation to WPS.

In a Feminist Response to the global ceasefire<sup>151</sup>, 85 NGOs including Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, the International Federation for Human Rights and Peace Brigades International have referred to the appeal for a global ceasefire, underlining that “measures taken increase women and girls’ vulnerability to violence, exacerbate the feminisation of poverty, and put further pressure on women and girls in their caretaking roles” and recommends that the UN “demand that States redirect public resources from weapons and war towards the production of medical equipment, medical staff, and provision of wages, rents, food and health care of those suffering from the economic impacts of the COVID-19”.<sup>152</sup>

<sup>149</sup> Oxfam, Cordaid

<sup>150</sup> Vond Foundation

<sup>151</sup> Human Rights Council virtual informal conversation with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Joint NGO statement on the United Nations’ COVID-19 response Thursday, 09 April 2020. <https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/HRC-virtual-informal-conversation-with-UNHCR-Joint-NGO-statement.pdf>

<sup>152</sup> Ibid

In a Response for Strong and Inclusive Civil Society Engagement at UN Virtual Meetings,<sup>153</sup> initiated by the Women’s Major Group, calls upon the UN to “use an unprecedented opportunity to ensure improved civil society access and meaningful engagement.” “If carried out inclusively and securely, online participation ... can widen the number and diversity of civil society actors engaging ... including after in-person meetings are resumed, as it will remove the resource constraints linked to travel. They call upon member states and the UN to: take measures to mitigate to the possibility of new and increased risks of intimidation and reprisals targeting human rights defenders; Connect with civil society actors who are less able to acquire the necessary technology and connectivity on their own; and assure a minimum of five civil society speakers per session, self-selected by the Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS) mechanism, with an aim for diversity in all its forms.<sup>154</sup>

<sup>153</sup> Women Major’s Group (2020). 350+ Groups Call onto UN and Member States for Strong Civil Society Inclusion in UN Virtual Meetings. <http://www.womenmajorgroup.org/350-groups-call-onto-un-and-member-states-for-strong-civil-society-inclusion-in-un-virtual-meetings/>

<sup>154</sup> Women Major’s Group (July 3, 2020). An Open Call for Strong and Inclusive Civil Society Engagement at UN Virtual Meetings [http://www.womenmajorgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/JUL\\_3\\_Strong-and-inclusive-CSO-engagement-at-UN-virtual-meetings-English-with-Signatures.pdf](http://www.womenmajorgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/JUL_3_Strong-and-inclusive-CSO-engagement-at-UN-virtual-meetings-English-with-Signatures.pdf)

## Recommendations to the Government of the Netherlands

### 1. Support systemic change as a response to both COVID-19 and conflict, and pro-actively voice the necessity and centrality of the WPS Framework.

- A. The WPS agenda has never been more relevant. This provides an opportunity to reinforce the messages around WPS in dialogue about systemic change: prioritize issues such as harmful gender norms, access to decision making positions, equal power balance, de-militarisation and actively include them in international fora, advocating for a gendered conflict and crisis analysis, and security approaches that are people-centric, gender sensitive, gender responsive and gender transformative. Ensure that existing peace processes, peacekeeping and conflict prevention, efforts continue, stressing the meaningful participation of women’s groups and organisations.
- B. As part of the WPS agenda, emphasize conflict and crisis related (S)GBV and the extra layer of vulnerability, due to lack of access to health care in conflict settings and to restrictive lockdown measures.

### 2. Rethink the role of front liners and local peacebuilders, how to reach them and provide them with adequate trust, ownership and funding.

- A. Grassroots organisations are the front-line workers in need of funding. Rethink the added value of front liners, and encourage locally embedded organisations that are given the representation, trust to self-define priorities and flexibility to respond to needs, with focus on women-led organisations.

**B.** Rethink how to better reach these organisations by adapting the bureaucracy around funding applications. Establish a grassroots fund for WPS organisations (with e.g. a 50.000 euro limit), as a way to achieve this.

**C.** The Netherlands has been a strong support partner for women peacebuilders; this commitment can be strengthened by directing efforts towards local initiatives. A strong global voice for such a localization agenda in international fora can profile the Dutch government.

**3. Provide Flexible Funding Mechanisms to allow for the leveraging of women's organisations' capacities.**

**A.** Donors and international organisations should sustain and increase financial support to and partnership with local women peacebuilders during the crisis: this should combine rapid response or ad hoc funds with long term organisational funding.

**B.** Allow organisations to self-define priorities and be flexible in spending funding so as to adapt to immediate needs and changing context on the ground. Ensure that budgets can be reviewed and adapted on a yearly basis.

**C.** Focus on lifting the barriers on direct funding for women peacebuilders.

**4. "What we treasure, we measure", so invest in sex-disaggregated data collection. A gendered conflict and crisis analysis must be at the centre of every response and recovery.**

**A.** Push for a gendered analysis of emergency funding and track, share and analyse sex, age and disability disaggregated data.

**B.** Actively build and globally endorse capacity on data analysis from a gender perspective and invest in national statistics departments to do gendered analysis.

**5. Publicly acknowledge the worrying trend of CSO exclusion from international fora and harness the potential around the digital divide and digitization.**

**A.** Publicly raise awareness on the consequences of excluding (marginalized) CSOs from international discussions on WPS and ensure that a diversity of perspectives is maintained.

**B.** Continue to monitor the backlash against CSOs and make use of diplomatic and financial 'push and pull' so as to ensure that other governments allow WHRDs to continue their work.

**C.** Seize the opportunities around digitization and actively support CSOs to bridge the digital divide. Follow the example of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development who, "under their CSO Enhancement Framework, aims to support the resilience of the CSO sector by actively supporting their digital transformation".<sup>155</sup>

**D.** Support activists to be safe and secure in using these online spaces to prevent further shrinking of civic space.

<sup>155</sup> EBRD (2020). CSO Capacity Enhancement Framework. <https://www.ebrd.com/who-we-are/civil-society-capacity-enhancement.html>

# 4. Gender and a Sustainable Economy

Ensuring that women, men and gender non-conforming persons have equal influence and entitlement to natural resources, manufacturing chains, and (international) companies, is one of WO=MEN's three focus areas.<sup>156</sup> This chapter summarizes the main impacts on, policy trends in and responses to the work done on the Business and Human rights (BHR) agenda.

### A. Impacts of COVID-19

#### 1. Exposing Existing Inequalities and Vulnerabilities

COVID-19 has grossly shown the global divide between those that have universal social protection, including health and income support, and those that do not.<sup>157</sup> In addition, it has also brought to light longstanding problems in global supply chains. Most prominently, it has exposed the unequal power distributions in the chain and has therefore surfaced where the system fails most: earning a living wage, gender equality, reliance on casual labour, and social protection. The crisis has shown more clearly how existing global trade patterns have been built on the backs of the poorest workers, who are often women workers that do not have social protection.<sup>158</sup>

There are more than 150 million workers in low-income countries producing goods for export to the industrialized North, with tens of millions more service jobs linked to transnational corporations in high income countries.<sup>159</sup> “While the impact of demand reductions will eventually affect all producers in the value chain, the financial burden [of this crisis] is unlikely to be shared equally by producers across the chain.”<sup>160</sup> In fact, cancellation and delays of orders across the board have resulted in a complete loss of livelihoods for many communities and

workers.<sup>161</sup> Past experiences, (ebola, financial crisis of 2008) have taught us that epidemics and economic crises can have a disproportionate impact on certain segments of the population, exacerbating the existing (gender) inequalities in the world of work.<sup>162</sup> This time around it does not look any different.

#### Women and Informal Workers

The most vulnerable in the labour market include informal workers and women. Almost 1.6 billion informal economy workers have been impacted by lockdown measures or by working in the hardest-hit sectors. The month of March 2020 was estimated to result in a decline in earnings of informal workers of 60 percent globally and 81 percent in Africa.<sup>163</sup> The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has therefore called for “urgent policy responses to protect enterprises, particularly workers operating in the informal economy.”<sup>164</sup>

Loss of income and type of work often goes hand in hand with losing social protection and security. As one respondent illustrates: “Here in Kenya, workers laid off need to still make monthly contributions to the National Hospital Insurance fund in order to access health care. If you have no salary and do not pay, you will be banned from accessing free (government provided) medical care.”<sup>165</sup> In addition, access to safety nets

<sup>157</sup> ITUC (2020). ITUC Global COVID-19 Survey [https://www.business-humanrights.org/sites/default/files/documents/200701\\_ituc\\_covid-19\\_globalsurveyreport\\_en%5B1%5D%5B1%5D.pdf](https://www.business-humanrights.org/sites/default/files/documents/200701_ituc_covid-19_globalsurveyreport_en%5B1%5D%5B1%5D.pdf)

<sup>158</sup> Anumo, Felogene (March 2020). Unchecked corporate power paved the way for COVID-19. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/blog/2020/03/17/unchecked-corporate-power-paved-the-way-for-COVID-19-and-globally-women-are-at-the-frontlines/>

<sup>159</sup> Schalatek, Liane (2020). The invisible coronavirus makes systemic gender inequalities and injustices visible.

<sup>160</sup> Clingendael (June 2020). COVID-19 Impact on the Value Chain – Conceptual paper. [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Conceptual\\_paper\\_COVID-19\\_Impact\\_on\\_the\\_Value\\_Chain\\_June\\_2020.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Conceptual_paper_COVID-19_Impact_on_the_Value_Chain_June_2020.pdf)

<sup>161</sup> As per Hivos, Clean Clothes Campaign, ActionAid, WomenWin and CNV

<sup>162</sup> Clingendael (June 2020).

<sup>163</sup> ILO (2018). World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends for Women 2018. [https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/trends-for-women2018/WCMS\\_619577/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/trends-for-women2018/WCMS_619577/lang-en/index.htm)

<sup>164</sup> ILO (June 2020). ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Fifth edition. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-dgreports/-dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_749399.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-dgreports/-dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_749399.pdf)

<sup>165</sup> HIVOS Kenya

frequently depend on formal participation in the labour force. Considering that 2 out of 3 women worldwide are employed in the informal sector,<sup>166</sup> they are considered to be hit hardest by this crisis, be it in the flower or in the garment sector. “Due to the casual and low wages they are paid, women do not have a buffer or social security. From one day to the next, women have lost money to educate their kids, pay the rent or buy food.”<sup>167</sup> “There is a risk of losing some of the gains made in recent decades and yet again exacerbating gender inequalities in the labour market ... [one factor being] that the increased burden of unpaid care brought by the crisis affects women more than men. <sup>168</sup> On top of this, women and women’s labour rights are often underrepresented in the labour unions.<sup>169</sup>

**“In the garment sector, the unequal power relations between [South based] suppliers and [North based] brands have particularly surfaced.”<sup>170</sup>**

#### **Horticulture and Garment and Textile Sector**

The viability of the textiles, clothing, leather and footwear industries is unravelling. For example, a survey conducted by the BHR Resource Centre of 35 fashion brands and retailers, showed that, as of July 16th: 40 percent of brands made no public commitment to pay for all completed orders; In Bangladesh, US\$3.7bn worth of orders were cancelled and 75,000 workers were not paid wages for March; and there was a 67 percent wage drop for suspended workers in Cambodia.<sup>171</sup> In Myanmar,

after major European orders were cancelled,<sup>172</sup> by early April, more than 40 factories had closed. The European Union (EU) estimated that half of the Myanmar garment labour force, 350,000 people, mostly women, were at risk of being suspended without pay.<sup>173</sup>

On average over 80 percent of garment industry workers are women, and, reportedly, “the crisis’ impact on them has been disastrous.”<sup>174</sup> Workers in both garment and in textile “run on the lowest possible margins, receiving the lowest pay so to render the largest profit. When disaster hits, they do not have the financial space to survive.”<sup>175</sup>

In the garment sector, the unequal power relations between South based suppliers and North based brands has particularly surfaced, causing the Clean Clothes Campaign and its members to call brands to honour their obligations to suppliers and workers. “The past few weeks have exposed the implications of near-absolute brand and retailer power in garment supply chains.”<sup>176</sup>

The horticulture sector in Kenya is probably one of the worst hit by the coronavirus pandemic as it is Kenya’s third largest foreign exchange earner (last year alone contributed KES 120 billion to the country’s gross domestic product.) Currently it is at less than 10 percent of its normal operations.<sup>177</sup> For example, cancellation of oversea orders and travel restrictions has hit the industry with an estimated 40 percent plunge in sales forcing players to turn on their 150,000 workforce to save their companies from outright losses. By March, 30,000 casual workers

<sup>166</sup> ActionAid (March 2020). 4 redenen waarom de coronacrisis vrouwen hard treft. <https://actionaid.nl/2020/03/27/waarom-de-coronacrisis-vrouwen-harder-treft/>

<sup>167</sup> CNV

<sup>168</sup> ILO (June 2020). ILO Monitor.

<sup>169</sup> CNV

<sup>170</sup> Clean Clothes Campaign

<sup>171</sup> BHR Resource Centre (2020). COVID-19 Apparel Action Tracker. <https://COVID19.business-humanrights.org/en/tracker/>

<sup>172</sup> ScandAsia (April 1, 2020). Myanmar garments factories closed down after major orders from EU market canceled. <https://scandasia.com/myanmar-garments-factories-closed-down-after-major-orders-from-eu-market-canceled/>

<sup>173</sup> SOMO (July 9 2020). Towards a new normal. <https://www.somo.nl/towards-a-new-normal/>

<sup>174</sup> Clean Clothes Campaign

<sup>175</sup> CNV

<sup>176</sup> Clean Clothes Campaign (2020). Brands and retailers need to step up now to protect garment workers. <https://cleanclothes.org/news/2020/brands-and-retailers-need-to-step-up-now-to-protect-garment-workers>

<sup>177</sup> Hivos (July 17, 2020). A sector worth billions whose employees now lack food and jobs. <https://www.hivos.org/news/a-sector-worth-billions-whose-employees-now-lack-food-and-jobs/>

had been axed while over 40,000 permanent staff were asked to go home.<sup>178</sup> “Women workers entirely rely on their meagre earnings from the farms thus the disruptions on their jobs have sabotaged their livelihoods and well-being.”<sup>179</sup> “As many of the workers are single parents – they have no means to take care of their children.”<sup>180</sup> HIVOS reports that in Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Zambia, COVID-19 has impacted women workers in the sector socially, economically and psychologically, with the effect spiralling to their homes, leaving them destitute.<sup>181</sup>

In this sector, “the crisis has particularly helped us to confirm how exposed workers are and how unstable it is.”<sup>182</sup> “The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the extreme vulnerability of women workers. As companies are slowly building back supply chains, it is important that the precarious nature of women’s work is addressed.”<sup>183</sup>

## 2. Role of Worker’s Organisations

An International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) survey from June 2020 demonstrated that in many countries, unions have been active in negotiating support for workers.<sup>184</sup> However, interviews held for this study represent a mixed bag of how unions have been able (or unable) to operationalise support on the ground. “Trade unions are key bargaining units and legal outfits instituted to represent workers. Still, this pandemic has left some of them exposed as many have been unable to negotiate for fair terms of dispensing with workers where this becomes inevitable. For instance, although the biggest agricultural union in Kenya negotiated rotational work schedules in most farms, in other instances the union

178 Business Daily (March 20, 2020). Flower farms send 30,000 workers home on corona lockdown. <https://www.businessdailyafrica.com/corporate/companies/Flower-farms-send-30-000-workers-home/4003102-5497422-1cj5wtz/index.html>

179 HIVOS Impact assessment on Kenya

180 Hivos Kenya

181 Hivos COVID Impact assessments Uganda, Kenya and Zambia

182 Hivos Kenya

183 WomenWin

184 ITUC (2020). ITUC Global COVID-19 Survey.

came off as a feeble outfit – with non-action when 2000 workers were laid off for disagreeing with reduction in their engagement terms. In contrary in Uganda, the union was more connected to its members and managed to put up a robust advocacy campaign on COVID-19 through mainstream and social media negotiating retention of workers on lesser pay and redressing the need for ... access to social security.”<sup>185</sup>

Moreover, unions report to receive threats to their work and person. In Myanmar, a young trade union has been reportedly threatened under the guise of COVID-19, as selective dismissals of union leaders and members seek to undermine the workers’ rights movement.<sup>186</sup> As one CSO reports: “Through our urgent appeal work, we see the first wave of violations coming in. We have seen imprisonment of women’s union leaders and union busting.”<sup>187</sup> In addition, governments including India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, have enforced internet restrictions and shutdowns which prevent many people from accessing vital information and affect remote work.<sup>188</sup>

**Supply chain and economic experts reiterate that trade unions have an important role to play in influencing to ensure that post-COVID recovery is inclusive and gender-equal.**

Supply chain and economic experts reiterate that trade unions have an important role to play in influencing governments and businesses to ensure that post-COVID recovery is inclusive and gender equal. There is an

185 HIVOS Kenya

186 Clean Clothes Campaign (2020). Union busting in Myanmar under guise of Covid-19. <https://cleanclothes.org/news/2020/union-busting-in-myanmar-under-guise-of-covid-19>

187 Clean Clothes Campaign

188 CIVICUS (April 16, 2020). We are in this together, don’t violate human rights while responding to COVID-19. <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/4379-civil-society-s-call-to-states-we-are-in-this-together-don-t-violate-human-rights-while-responding-to-covid-19>

opportunity to leverage initiatives like 'build back better' to strengthen the bargaining power of workers' organisations and women's representatives in decision-making processes.<sup>189</sup> Also the ILO has stressed that "social dialogue involving governments and employers' and workers' representatives is more important than ever and that the organisation is relying on it for solutions.<sup>190</sup> There have been some positive developments in engagement between actors through digital tools and social dialogue, *read more about this in 4.C.*

### 3. Need for Social Protection & Responsible Business Operations

In spite of the disastrous impact of this crisis on supply chain workers, it has provided an explicit 'awakening' that may give the Business and Human Rights agenda the push that it needs. As one respondent illustrates: "This crisis is the worst wake-up call imaginable to show that the total absence of social security as a concept in current supply chains is not sustainable."<sup>191</sup> "Also companies who had previously shown commitment to becoming more sustainable, have shared 'we simply cannot stick to our agreements and meet living wage standards now.' Which is a bitter pill to swallow, as it feels that we are back to square one."<sup>192</sup>

The crisis has made clear that discussions around and actions on living wage have to expediently continue. "If workers had been paid an honest wage that allows for basic needs and building reserves, the world would look differently now: they would have had capital and have not faced struggle in the first month."<sup>193</sup>

<sup>189</sup> Clingendael (June 2020). COVID-19 Impact on the Value Chain – Conceptual paper. f

<sup>190</sup> ILO (2020). ILO Policy Brief on COVID-19

Pillar 4: Relying on social dialogue for solutions.

[https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/impacts-and-responses/WCMS\\_739050/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/impacts-and-responses/WCMS_739050/lang-en/index.htm)

<sup>191</sup> Clean Clothes Campaign (2020). Brands and retailers need to step up now to protect garment workers.

<https://cleanclothes.org/news/2020/brands-and-retailers-need-to-step-up-now-to-protect-garment-workers>

<sup>192</sup> Hivos

<sup>193</sup> Hivos Kenya

**The current pandemic in that sense speaks to the business and human rights field. It shows how the dominant business model has failed to provide resilience for the majority in our societies.**

The corona crisis also shows some evidence that companies that had previously embraced sustainable supply chain solutions were better able to keep their supply chain standing.<sup>194</sup> Corporate governance that shows leadership and takes responsibility has been essential. "Companies that remained engaged with workers and stakeholders have been able to cope better by joining forces to tackle abuse, those with environmental safety measures were better prepared, and those companies showing this kind of leadership have received more positive reactions from investors; many of whom see it as sign of resilience and generating value."<sup>195</sup> In line with this, the ILO Summit committed on July 13th, 2020, to creating 'a better world of work after COVID-19'. UN Secretary General Gutierrez added to this that recovery from the crisis, "is not a choice between health or jobs and the economy. We will either win on all fronts or fail on all fronts... we can emerge from this crisis stronger, with decent jobs ... for all."<sup>196</sup>

The current pandemic in that sense speaks to the business and human rights agenda. It shows how the dominant business model has failed to provide resilience for the majority in our societies. It demonstrates further the accountability gap in business activities and the inability of the voluntary UNGPs to bridge this gap. It therefore highlights the need for imposing on corporations, direct human rights obligations which incorporate a gender lens and consider specific impacts on women and girls.<sup>197</sup>

<sup>194</sup> CNV

<sup>195</sup> As shared by Acting Head, Centre for Responsible Business Conduct OECDt during #RBHRF2020:

Human Rights Due Diligence During COVID-19 and Lessons for the Future

<sup>196</sup> TBSNews (July 2020). ILO summit commits to creating better world of work after Covid-19.

<https://tbsnews.net/coronavirus-chronicle/ilo-summit-commits-creating-better-world-work-after-covid-19-105625>

<sup>197</sup> Opinio Juris (May 31, 2020). Every Cloud Has a Silver Lining: COVID-19 as a Catalyst for Human Rights in Business. <http://opiniojuris.org/2020/05/31/every-cloud-has-a-silver-lining-COVID-19-as-a-catalyst-for-human-rights-in-business/>

## B. Company, National, and International Policy Response

### 1. Company level Response

As some state, the crisis has “shown the best and worse behaviour in companies.”<sup>198</sup> “We hear wonderful words about human rights and fair pay, but immediately some companies cancelled all orders in order to reduce their own losses.”<sup>199</sup> <sup>200</sup> Some major players such as C&A, Walmart and Primark continue to stand by their decision not to pay for work already in process or completed. Some companies have tried to protect themselves and parties ‘closer to home’ from adverse impacts. In addition, some companies are trying to relax existing collective bargaining agreements and also compliance with labour laws has relaxed.<sup>201</sup>

However, there were some positive exceptions during this crisis, as increasingly some fashion brands such as GAP, Nike and H&M have committed to paying suppliers in full.<sup>202</sup> “In the beginning of the pandemic, many orders were cancelled and not paid for by major brands. Since then, some brands have taken responsibility for ensuring workers are still receiving financial support through, for example, unconditional cash transfers.”<sup>203</sup> The Coca-Cola Company has started to try new remote approaches using technology to continue their human rights due diligence (HRDD).<sup>204</sup> And in the flower sector, some were seen to continue to produce to keep people working, while simply destroying flowers afterwards.<sup>205</sup> It is important to keep in mind, however, that these same companies have previously hit the news due to issues such as child labour and bad working conditions, so focus on complying with labour

<sup>198</sup> RBHRF2020: Human Rights Due Diligence During COVID-19 and Lessons for the Future – Webinar attended by researcher on June 18, 2020.

<sup>199</sup> Clean Clothes Campaign

<sup>200</sup> See <https://www.workersrights.org/issues/COVID-19/tracker/>

<sup>201</sup> Hivos Kenya, Clean Clothes Campaign, ActionAid

<sup>202</sup> As per July 14<sup>th</sup>, found on: <https://www.workersrights.org/issues/COVID-19/tracker/>

<sup>203</sup> WomenWin

<sup>204</sup> #RBHRF2020: Human Rights Due Diligence During COVID-19 and Lessons for the Future – Webinar attended by researcher June 18, 2020

<sup>205</sup> Hivos Kenya

standards in ‘regular post-COVID. times’ needs to remain a primary focus. In addition, “only a small sample of the companies we work with have been willing to discuss gender equality and are prepared to make some sacrifices to meet their commitments.”<sup>206</sup> Across the board, adverse impacts further upstream -or further away from HQ- including issues such as living wage, freedom of association and gender equality, appear to have moved down the list of companies’ priorities.<sup>207</sup>

### 2. National Level Response

The national policy response varies considerably. Some countries have implemented emergency grants, cash transfers and utility waivers for water and electricity. However, despite this apparent effort, just 2 percent of the world population had received a COVID-19 related cash transfer by June 12th.<sup>208</sup> In addition, funds are often not sufficient to sustain a livelihood. Cambodia provides support, but it is reportedly only 30 percent of the earned income.<sup>209</sup> In Kenya and Uganda the government has provided cash transfers to vulnerable populations, however, women and men with a job are reportedly not considered ‘vulnerable’ and thus do not receive this money (which is highly needed to support their family).<sup>210</sup>

An exemplary response has been the Feminist Economic Recovery Plan of Hawaii, which puts at its centre women from the most marginalized groups that have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. The plan proposes measures that will help aid in recovery from the economic fallout and introduces fundamental changes to the way women’s work is valued and compensated. “I have not seen any nation propose a feminist economic recovery, one that explicitly centres women or attempts to counteract

<sup>206</sup> Hivos

<sup>207</sup> CNV and Clean Clothes Campaign

<sup>208</sup> Gentilini, Ugo, et al. (June 2020). Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures [https://www.ugogentilini.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/SP-COVID-responses\\_June-12.pdf](https://www.ugogentilini.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/SP-COVID-responses_June-12.pdf) and <https://includeplatform.net/news/spotlight-social-protection-COVID-19/>

<sup>209</sup> CNV

<sup>210</sup> Hivos Kenya

patriarchy,”<sup>211</sup> said Khara Jabola-Carolus, executive director of the Hawai’i State Commission on the Status of Women. She consulted extensively with women organizing in Hawaiian communities, both active inside and outside government to draft the Plan. “It pushes back on cuts in social protection and job creation and pushes the transition from work – decoupling health care and well-being from waged work – something that the feminist movement has been calling for a long time.”<sup>212</sup> Carolus states to have received mostly enthusiastic responses at country level – the city of Maui is now adopting the first legislation for a feminist Recovery Bill.<sup>213</sup>

**“I have not seen any nation propose a feminist economic recovery, one that explicitly centres women or attempts to counteract patriarchy.”<sup>214</sup>**

### 3. International and Donor Policy Response

#### Binding Treaty and ILO Convention C190

Respondents interviewed for this study observe a worrying trend in UN level negotiations concerning two key instruments that could potentially protect the rights of women’s and the most marginalized in supply chains: the internationally legally binding instrument on business and human rights and the ILO and the ILO Convention C190 – Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190). While the treaty process has been ongoing for the last six years, there is no trace that a positive outcome will be reached soon.

There are fears that COVID-19 will further delay the process. “Negotiations have been scheduled to take place in October, not in Geneva this year but online. Although the negotiations do of course still remain at risk of being

<sup>211</sup> High Level Political Forum Webinar – Imagine a post COVID-19 city—with women’s human rights. Attended virtually 9 July

<sup>212</sup> Ibid

<sup>213</sup> Ibid

<sup>214</sup> Khara Jabola-Carolus, Hawaiian Economic Recovery Plan

deprioritized and postponed. Worryingly, the EU does not appear to be getting prepared for the negotiations. We fear that COVID-19 will be used as an excuse to cancel their engagement.”<sup>215</sup>

While the pandemic has intensified the already existing discrimination and violence in the world of work, the ILO Convention 190-ratification process it has thus far only been ratified by Fiji and Uruguay<sup>216</sup>] has been delayed due to COVID-19. “At this point, the ratification of the ILO C 190 in the Netherlands seems to have moved to the background even though this convention provides a roadmap for a just, safe work environment which is more needed more than ever before.”<sup>217</sup> “COVID-19 is showing how important this convention is so the campaign has to continue.”<sup>218</sup> The ILO did release a brief in May 2020, highlighting the relevance of the Convention and encouraging constituents to ensure that the principles and policy measures laid out in Convention No. 190 and Recommendation No. 206 guide the design and implementation of COVID-19 recovery responses. It also stresses the importance of the ratification of Convention No. 190.<sup>219</sup>

#### Human Rights Due Diligence

COVID-19 has created a momentum for Mandatory Human Rights Due Diligence (mHRDD). According to the UNGPs, corporates must conduct HRDD in identifying, preventing, mitigating and, very importantly, remedying the adverse human rights impacts occurring in their operations and throughout their supply chains. The crisis, however, has shown that voluntary HRDD does not appear to encourage companies to do so. Worldwide, organisations have picked up on this.

<sup>215</sup> ActionAid

<sup>216</sup> Ratification: [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11300:0::NO:11300:P11300\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:3999810:NO](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11300:0::NO:11300:P11300_INSTRUMENT_ID:3999810:NO)

<sup>217</sup> CNV

<sup>218</sup> ActionAid

<sup>219</sup> ILO (May 2020). ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190): 12 ways it can support the COVID-19 response and recovery. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms\\_744676.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms_744676.pdf)

First, at UN level, United Nations office of the Commissioner of Human rights (OHCHR) published a paper on design options, legislative proposals for mandatory human rights due diligence by companies, and key considerations.<sup>220</sup> It explains mHRDD as “a key tool in the global efforts to Build Back Better, since it enables companies to focus their attention on the most severe human rights risks and identify the human rights impact of their response to the COVID-19 pandemic.”<sup>221</sup>

In addition, UNDP created a HRDD and COVID-19: Rapid Self-Assessment for Business, to help businesses manage the human rights impacts of their operations.<sup>222</sup>

At EU level, there is also movement, particularly after April 29: that day, during a webinar organised by the European Commission’s Responsible Business Conduct (RBC) Working Group, the EU Commissioner for Justice, Didier Reynders, committed to a legislative initiative on mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence obligations for EU companies in early 2021, which will include liability and enforcement mechanisms and access to remedy provisions for victims of corporate abuse.<sup>223</sup> Respondents confirm that this commitment has created traction. His statement has had influence and hopefully will move the agenda on human rights due diligence legislation forward in the Netherlands.<sup>224</sup>

For example, Dutch Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation Sigrid Kaag, in a non-paper drafted with her French colleague

Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne, calls for the importance of the development of an EU framework on RBC. “This work should also include the revision of the non-financial reporting directive and the discussions on EU-level legislation on due diligence. The Commission is asked to develop this Action Plan before 2022 in cooperation with the Council.”<sup>225</sup> “We have been cautiously optimistic about by the commitment to processes that explore mandatory HRDD.”<sup>226</sup>

In addition, in June 2020, Dutch Member of Parliament Kirsten van den Hul, filed a motion on RBC, asking the Dutch Government how companies active in low income countries, are being held responsible for complying with existing guidelines on RBC.<sup>227</sup> Finally, an evaluation by the KIT Royal Tropical Institute on the main voluntary rules (in this case the Dutch RBC Covenant process) in the Netherlands showed that the researchers overall, “have not observed a reduction in negative impacts in global value chains as a result of the RBC agreements.”<sup>228</sup> This may provide a final push for the Dutch Government to move on to further prioritizing the mHRDD debate.

Still, until mHRDD legislation has been passed, it is not within the power of the government to force companies into any commitments. Respondents flag that waiting for EU level legislation will be a waste of this momentum. “the EC has announced its commitment to mHRDD but this will take a long time to translate into action. This period in the meantime can be used to create a much needed national blueprint, taking French and German legislation as a guideline.”<sup>229</sup> “Whether the government may not yet have the right instruments in place to push for HRDD, it is within their power

220 OHCHR (June 2020). UN Human Rights “Issues Paper” on legislative proposals for mandatory human rights due diligence by companies. [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Business/MandatoryHR\\_Due\\_Diligence\\_Issues\\_Paper.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Business/MandatoryHR_Due_Diligence_Issues_Paper.pdf)

221 Ibid

222 UNDP (April 10, 2020). Human Rights Due Diligence and COVID-19: Rapid Self-Assessment for Business. <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/human-rights-due-diligence-and-covid-19-rapid-self-assessment-for-business.html>

223 ECCJ (April 30, 2020). Commissioner Reynders announces EU corporate due diligence legislation. <https://corporatejustice.org/news/16806-commissioner-reynders-announces-eu-corporate-due-diligence-legislation>

224 CNV

225 Rijksoverheid (May 14, 2020). Non-paper from the Netherlands and France on trade, social economic effects and sustainable development. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/publicaties/2020/05/14/non-paper-from-the-netherlands-and-france-on-trade-social-economic-effects-and-sustainable-development>

226 ActionAid

227 Tweede Kamer (June 15, 2020). Motie van het lid Van den Hul c.s. over bedrijven houden aan imvo en een bijdrage aan duurzame ontwikkeling. <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/detail?id=2020Z11097&did=2020D23942>

228 Rijksoverheid (July 10, 2020). Kamerbrief rapport evaluatie IMVO-convenanten. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2020/07/10/kamerbrief-rapport-evaluatie-imvo-convenanten>

229 Clean Clothes Campaign

to make a stronger moral call towards companies to respect voluntary guidelines and encourage their embassies to better report and engage on accountability of Dutch companies abroad.<sup>230</sup> A good example is the role of the Dutch Embassy in Myanmar, which has been vocal about unlawful arrests of women union leaders.

**“The EC has announced its commitment to mandatory HRDD, but this will take a long time to translate into action. This period can be used to create a much needed national blueprint.”<sup>231</sup>**

Finally, while Minister Kaag has in the past shown support for the focus on women’s rights in Dutch RBC, in the current response on company support packages, a strong gender equality component is missing. “How will compensation trickle down to vulnerable women in the supply chain? In current discussions, Dutch companies take the central stage and the role of women has been largely left out of the debate.”<sup>232</sup>

As, overall, BHR discourse has not so far given adequate attention to the differentiated impacts of business-related human rights abuses on women and the additional barriers that they face in accessing effective remedies<sup>233</sup>, the Dutch Government may be advised to consider the Gender Guidance that was created by the UN<sup>234</sup> setting out how to take concrete steps to identify, prevent and remedy gender-based discrimination and inequalities.

<sup>230</sup> Hivos Kenya

<sup>231</sup> Clean Clothes Campaign

<sup>232</sup> HIVOS

<sup>233</sup> OHCHR (2020). Gender lens to the UNGPs. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Business/Pages/GenderLens.aspx>

<sup>234</sup> OHCHR (2019). Gender Guidance on the UNGPs. <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Business/Booklet-GenderDimensionsGuidingPrinciples.pdf>

## C. CSO Response

### 1. Switch to digital tools

The current crisis presents challenges for civil society; however, there are also new opportunities for it to embrace digital civic engagement. Respondents report that CSOs and worker organisations have at times managed to harness the power of digital through online trainings on social dialogue, online advocacy and, especially, digital apps which have become important in supplying information.<sup>235</sup> Also many policy influencing processes have moved online,<sup>236</sup> increasingly demonstrating the digital divide between different CSOs and WROs. (Also see Chapter 2)

A few examples to illustrate this process: In Guatemala, app groups were created in the sugar sector between employees and labour lawyers that allowed for immediate questioning about COVID-19 restrictions, measures and labour rights. “In Asian countries, such as Vietnam and Indonesia, we have seen an increased level of social dialogue within the garment sector to find solutions in the COVID-19 crisis for workers, employers and government.”<sup>237</sup> In addition, CSOs have increased engagement through media and online conversations with duty bearers, such as governments.<sup>238</sup> This has provided new opportunities for building broader participation by a network of reporters and activists with strong links to the communities and to hold government accountable for violations.

### 2. Opportunity for Push back on Unequal Power Relations

The crisis has also offered new opportunities for CSOs and worker organisations to collectively push back on unequal power relations. For example, Bangladeshi apparel makers have collectively challenged western apparel brands, threatening to blacklist British brands if they would not pay outstanding debts to suppliers. On May 21, the Bangladesh

<sup>235</sup> CNV

<sup>236</sup> CNV, HIVOS, WomenWin, Clean Clothes Campaign all named examples and ActionAid named examples

<sup>237</sup> CNV

<sup>238</sup> Hivos

Garments Manufacturing and Exporters Association's (BGMEA) President Rubana Huq wrote EWM sharing that buyers have been taking undue advantage of the COVID-19 situation "warning them to settle their bills or face a complete embargo on doing business in Bangladesh."<sup>239</sup> She illustrated the two-facedness of sustainability commitments by saying: "We are never going to go for a confrontational relationship and have always been strategic, but with our businesses hanging by a thread, we need to step up and rate and rank buyers. There is a lot of talk on sustainability out there, but sourcing practices are not syncing with sustainability concerns."<sup>240</sup>

Also in South Africa and Peru mine workers have resisted going back to work without adequate protective gear and information about cases at sites. One major union in South Arica, AMCU, filed legal action to demand national safety standards for mines, including nationwide sanitization procedures and a minimum standard for protective gear, potentially raising costs for companies.<sup>241</sup>

In Vietnam, a joint statement was signed by Vietnamese employers' organisations VITAS, the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the national trade union (VGCL). The statement observes the negative impact on Vietnam's garment and shoe industries over the COVID-19 pandemic and points out an action plan towards a sustainable industry ratifying international conventions, and compliant with the socially responsible requirements.<sup>242</sup>

<sup>239</sup> The Business Standard (May 22, 2020). Bangladesh threatens to blacklist non-paying British brands. <https://tbsnews.net/economy/rmg/bangladesh-threatens-blacklist-non-paying-british-brands-84559>

<sup>240</sup> Daily Star (May 23, 2020). BGMEA threatens to blacklist British retailer EWM over non-payment. <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/bgmea-threatens-blacklist-british-retailer-ewm-over-non-payment-1905334>

<sup>241</sup> Reuters (April 28, 2020). World's mine workers resist quick restart amid coronavirus. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-mining/worlds-mine-workers-resist-quick-restart-amid-coronavirus-idUSKCN22A2NP>

<sup>242</sup> CNV Internationaal (2020). Historic Joint Statement Signed In Vietnamese Garment Industry. <https://www.cnvinternationaal.nl/en/our-work/news/2020/june/historic-joint-statement-signed-in-vietnamese-garment-industry>

Respondents flag that, because local unions and organisations are actively finding ways to pick up more work, without as much support from international organisations present in the country, resources – both financial and non-financial – are needed so that these organisations can invest in their own resilience and to make sure that this advocacy ecosystem and momentum remains. Organisations need access to networks and dialogues with private sector; a meeting ground that could all be facilitated by the Dutch embassies.

**Resources – both financial and non-financial- are needed so that these organisations can invest in their own resilience. Organisations need access to networks and dialogues with private sector; this meeting ground could be facilitated by the Dutch embassies.**

### 3. Massive Feminist Claims for Restructuring

Finally, feminist and non-feminist groups are massively calling for more structural economic changes. Gender networks in numerous papers<sup>243</sup> have articulated core feminist principles that need to guide such a systemic paradigm shift for the post-pandemic era.<sup>244</sup> These include the cancellation of all outstanding sovereign debt of developing countries to create the fiscal space for emergency responses (embracing a main feminist claim that foreign debt undermines women's rights nationally)<sup>245</sup>, calls to ensure that macro-economic policies work for people and planet<sup>246</sup>, and claims investment in public and gender responsive

<sup>243</sup> WIDE plus (2020); COVID-19 Crisis from a feminist perspective: overview of different articles published. <https://wideplus.org/2020/03/26/COVID-19-crisis-from-a-feminist-perspective-overview-of-different-articles-published/>

<sup>244</sup> Schalatek, Liane (2020). The invisible coronavirus makes systemic gender inequalities and injustices visible.

<sup>245</sup> Feminist Response To Covid-19.

<sup>246</sup> CMI! (June 1, 2020). CMI! Recommendations on COVID-19 and women's human rights.

services.<sup>247</sup> Organisations are also collectively tracking governments and corporations' actions.<sup>248</sup>

If realized, these recommendations will increase investment in public health systems; expand social protection systems for workers and marginalized populations, include unpaid care work; cancel developing countries' existing debt; address GBV and hold perpetrators accountable; finance women's rights and gender equality organisations, and stimulate women's equal participation measures, among others.

In sum, as eloquently put by the Associate Director of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung: "Ultimately, this might be our best chance yet to make lemonade out of pandemic lemons, working towards transforming the current economic paradigm into an inclusive economy that cares equally and without discrimination."<sup>249</sup>

**"Ultimately, this might be our best chance yet to make lemonade out of pandemic lemons. We can work towards transforming the current economic paradigm into an inclusive economy."<sup>250</sup>**

<sup>247</sup> Action Aid (2020). Who Cares For The Future: Finance Gender Responsive Public Services. <https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/publications/Who%20Cares%20-%20Summary%20Report%20-%20final%20revised.pdf>

<sup>248</sup> Feminist Response To Covid-19 Tracker. <https://www.feministCOVIDresponse.com/response-tracker>

<sup>249</sup> Schalatek, Liane (2020). The invisible coronavirus makes systemic gender inequalities and injustices visible.

<sup>250</sup> Liane Schalatek, Director of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

## Recommendations to the Government of the Netherlands

### 1. Advocate for core feminist principles to guide a systemic economic paradigm shift.

- A.** Be open to dialogue on structural change based on core feminist principles, and do not perpetuate economic structures that contribute to inequality. Start by including gender equality into trade agreements and by reviewing the elements in the Hawaiian COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan for feminist guidance on how to respond to the crisis, both nationally and abroad.
- B.** As part of this structural solution, ensure that not just the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, but also the Minister of Culture and Education (OCW) and the Minister of Finance, join these conversations.

### 2. Hold companies to account for human rights violations abroad, ratify and support binding legislation, and use your position within the EU to advocate for binding legislation.

- A.** Ratify ILO Convention C190 and advocate for ratification of the Convention in international fora, to ensure that international legislation is enshrined in domestic laws worldwide and to ensure protection of workers from violence and harassment.
- B.** Redress the balance between the rights and the obligations of transnational companies and safeguard the primacy of human rights by pushing for the EU to support a UN binding treaty on business and human rights
- C.** Continue supporting the EU process on developing mandatory HRDD legal frameworks that also are conscious of gender equality. Actively examine and question gender norms and power imbalances in the way supply chains are set up.

- D. Meanwhile, create binding legislation on HRDD in the Netherlands. Use the momentum created by Reynders and by the evaluation of the RBC covenants.
- E. Ensure compliance of Dutch companies with local laws abroad by encouraging, for example, better reporting on compliance.

**3. Lead by example by taking a rights-based approach to recovery plans and business practices nationally and abroad.**

- A. Humanitarian response is important, but do not lose sight of applying a rights-based approach to recovery that focuses on the protection of rights holders and those most marginalized upstream in the supply chain.
- B. Set conditions for COVID-19 support to companies and governments so as to ensure that funds trickle down from national level to citizens and workers.
- C. Look at your own procurement. Make sure that a human rights and gender lens is applied here also.
- D. Utilize embassies and 'soft power' to ensure laws linked to BHR and RBC are ratified and implemented in countries where Dutch business is active. Support Southern governments to engage in the BHR dialogue and process.

**4. Provide financial and non-financial resources to local WROs and CSOs working on labour rights and acknowledge and leverage their capacity in national and international dialogues.**

- A. Ensure and facilitate local CSOs' participation in international dialogues on labour rights.
- B. Leverage initiatives like "Build back better" to strengthen the bargaining power of workers' organisations and women's representatives in decision-making processes.

- C. At national level, ensure that Embassies facilitate dialogue between local organisations, WROs and private sector, provide them access to networks and pro-actively engage on lack of accountability by Dutch companies.
- D. Participate in learning sessions on gender transformative approaches in BHR organised by Dutch CSOs such as WO=MEN.

<b>Nr</b>	<b>Name Org</b>	<b>Name staff</b>	<b>Date planned, 2020</b>
1	AWID	Felogene Anumo	July 1
2	ActionAid	Rachel Walker	June 25
3	CNV International	Anne Dankert	June 25
4	Cordaid	Anne Kwakkenbos	June 11
5	Creaworld	Sunita Kujur	June 29
6	ECNL	Katerina Hadzi-Miceva	July 8
7	Hivos	Caroline Wildeman	June 10
8	Hivos Kenya	Virginia Munyua	June 19
9	ICNL	Ona Flores	July 8
10	Oxfam Novib	Sarah Pelman	June 10
11	Kvinna till Kvinna	Linda Säll	May 18
12	Schone Kleren Campagne	Bram Joanknecht	June 25
13	Vond Foundation	Mekka Abdelgabar	June 9
14	WIPC	Helen Kezie-Nwoha	June 11
15	Women Win	Kimberly Schoenmaker	June 19
16	Lid WO=MEN	Liesbeth van de Hoogte	June 25
17	Individueel WO=MEN lid / MenEngage network	Jan Reynders	June 26

# Colophon

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