



IN BRIEF



# PUTTING WOMEN AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE COVID-19 RESPONSE IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

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## The Challenge

COVID-19 is causing an unprecedented crisis that is disrupting lives, health, economies and societies. It has altered perceptions of safety and security for millions of people in social isolation, particularly women. The pandemic is the greatest socioeconomic shock since World War II. COVID-19 is not just a health crisis, it is a humanitarian and development crisis with the worst impact expected in fragile contexts and conflict settings. All 18 countries and territories<sup>1</sup> supported by UN Women in Europe and Central Asia (ECA) are affected, with Turkey at the epicentre having reported more than 27,000 cases as of 6 April 2020, according to the WHO.

Evidence shows that the impacts and implications of COVID-19 are different for women and men, and that they are exacerbating existing gender inequalities and posing an additional burden for women and girls.

- **Women are facing increased intimate partner violence and other forms of domestic violence** while confined at home due to imposed movement restrictions, social distancing and the suspension of most businesses and social services. Support to survivors is disrupted with overburdened health and support workers responding to COVID-19 cases. Data from governments and

women's organizations are showing a spike in reported cases of violence. In China, domestic violence cases surged threefold when millions of people were under COVID-19 quarantine.<sup>2</sup> In Europe, cases of domestic violence are also increasing at an alarming rate - France 30% increase, Spain 18% and England up to 20%.<sup>3</sup> Of concern are the invisible victims and how to reach women and girls isolated with their abusers. Once isolation ends, the lasting economic fallout can expose women to sexual exploitation, as witnessed during the 2013–2016 Ebola outbreak.

- **Women are hit harder by economic impacts caused by COVID-19** because they are more often engaged in short-term, part-time or informal employment which offers limited social security, pension and health insurance. Women on the move – such as refugees, internally displaced populations and irregular migrants – are at an even greater risk of being left behind, with little or no means of ensuring minimum income, food, shelter or safety for the family. If exposed to COVID-19, they may face greater risks due to their limited access to critical health care.

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1. Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, Kazakhstan, Kosovo (under UN Resolution), Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Ukraine, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Turkey  
2. Lara Owen. 8 March 2020. "Coronavirus: Five ways virus upheaval is hitting women in Asia". BBC.  
3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html>

- **Exacerbated burdens of unpaid care work on women and girls.** With health systems overloaded and schools closed, a greater burden is placed on care and domestic work in the home and that burden lands largely on women and girls.
- **Women health-care workers are playing a disproportionate role in responding to COVID-19** as front-line health workers or health and elder-care facility staff. Globally, 70% of workers in the health and social sector are women, and as such they are more likely to be exposed to the virus. They may also face the added physical and psychological stress of balancing paid and unpaid work roles.

## Our Solutions

UN Women's response to COVID-19 is to ensure that gender equality and women's empowerment are both integrated as a cross-cutting commitment in prevention, response and recovery, and made an integral factor in effective COVID-19 mitigation strategies and actions. Women and girls are critical enablers in such efforts and need to be centrally engaged in driving solutions for COVID-19. In this context, UN Women is building on its existing humanitarian-development efforts, outbreak and disaster response experience and its triple mandate – normative, coordination and programmatic.

Our emphasis is framed within the core normative principle of 'leaving no one behind', with an evidence-based approach to ensure an effective and sustainable strategy that protects and promotes the rights of all women and girls, including the most vulnerable and marginalized, survivors of gender-based violence, women-headed households, people with disabilities, women migrant workers, refugees and displaced populations, minority groups, LGBTI+ people, women living with HIV/AIDS, aging populations, caregivers and health-care-providers.

At present, our COVID-19 pandemic response spans 18 countries and territories in the ECA region, where we are mobilizing a broad range of efforts that include transitioning to digital and virtual platforms for delivering our commitments to women and girls and counteracting the negative effects of COVID-19 on gender equality, in a region already witnessing a backlash against women's rights.



*In Sombor, Serbia, beneficiaries of a women's shelter got together to contribute to COVID-19 response in their local community by sewing protective face masks.*  
Photo: UN Women/Tamara Savovic

Our value proposition for gender-equal preparedness, response and recovery builds on:

- Our mandate on gender equality (normative, coordination and programmatic) to address COVID-19-exclusive challenges faced by women and girls in a comprehensive and integrated manner
- Solid technical expertise and knowledge on global gender equality norms and standards and gender-responsive approaches in programming, with a focus on ensuring that no one is left behind
- Demonstrated models, practices and tools across all areas for change along the humanitarian-development continuum and digital transformation
- Wide-ranging presence and vast networks of grass-roots women, civil society, youth groups, gender machineries and core partners on gender equality and women's empowerment.

## Our Approach

Our approach to confronting COVID-19 impacts reflects three immediate priorities:

1. **Address challenges of gender-based violence, care work and restricted livelihoods, being faced by women**
  - a) **To support women and girl survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) or those at risk of violence** during imposed isolation or mobility restrictions, we are expanding and adapting essential and multisectoral services for GBV prevention and response. COVID-19 protocols we are developing with the Government of **Albania** will handle cases of domestic abuse and ensure the functioning of shelters; in **Kosovo**, immediate shelters will be accessible to over 550 women survivors



of GBV and trends in domestic violence cases are being monitored by the Police Domestic Violence Units; in **Moldova**, we have delivered essential products to 250 women survivors, including those with children; in **Serbia**, immediate and short-term emergency support will be provided to around 170 survivors in 13 safe houses; in **Turkey**, we're ensuring vulnerable women and survivors are accessing key services together with women's organizations; and in **Ukraine**, we have launched interactive webinars for GBV survivors. Innovative tech-based solutions are being designed such as SMS and online reporting, counselling and networks for social support, as well as online advocacy and media campaigns on GBV.



*UN Women and UNFPA delivered essential products to about 250 women survivors of violence in shelters across Moldova, with support from Sweden. Photo: UNFPA Moldova/ Dan Gutu*

**b) To reduce the burden of women's domestic care work and at-risk women health workers**, we are providing priority support to women on the front lines of COVID-19 response. Isolated women living with disabilities are receiving support with care work and personal assistants in **Georgia** and **North Macedonia**; and we are facilitating health and social care workers and caregivers with women-friendly personal protective equipment and flexible working arrangements. We are advocating to include front-line women health workers in decision-making and policy spaces for improved health security surveillance, detection and prevention mechanisms. Through exigency procurement measures in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, **Kyrgyzstan** and **Serbia**, we are providing immediate medical supplies to non-governmental organizations in the field; in **Moldova**, 15 public associations and institutions and placement centres have been provided with prevention items; and in **Ukraine**, the 'most vulnerable groups' will receive protection supplies.

**c) To provide women with access to livelihood and income-generation activities during restrictions created by COVID-19, and into the recovery phase**, we are working with governments and partners to mitigate the economic impact of the COVID-19 on women, including by expanding social protection plans and emerging economic schemes. Studies have been initiated on women's unpaid care work and economic constraints faced by women entrepreneurs and women in the informal sector, due to lockdowns. Targeted support will be offered to sectors where women are overrepresented, such as daily wage earners, small-business-owners and those in the informal sector (home-based or agricultural workers). Simultaneously, we are building women's economic resilience and endurance to future shocks. With the private sector, we are assessing the gender impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods of women-owned small businesses. In **Georgia**, with the TASO Foundation, we interviewed over 80 women small-business-owners (from mostly rural areas and mostly agribusinesses) on the impact of COVID-19 on their operations. To support women's economic recovery and empowerment, we will work with governments especially at a municipal level, on medium- to long-term investments to address the differential economic impacts of COVID-19 and attain economic efficiency by including gender equity in recovery plans and budget performance indicators.

**d) To leverage the current context as an opportunity to explore new ways of work**, we are building on our work and results in the digital sector as well as our private-sector partnerships. For example, in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** and **Kyrgyzstan**, we are powering up the digital revolution for women and girls through STEM and helping train girls in programming and coding. We will deepen engagement and build women's resilience through innovation and non-traditional digital and ICT sectors (where they are currently underrepresented), in STEM fields, e-businesses and e-markets, as well as in e-savings (to ensure women's equal access and benefit) and women's financial inclusion. In **Serbia** and **Ukraine**, we are supporting central and municipal governments to increase procurement with women-owned businesses, and we will look to apply 'smart economics' during COVID-19 responses and increase goods and services procured from women entrepreneurs.



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## 2. Gender data and analyses are integrated into COVID-19 response plans, budgets and actions

a) **To position multisectoral gender analyses as an integral part of COVID-19 response plans, budgets and actions**, we are providing technical expertise and assistance to governments and key responders to better understand the gendered and intersectional considerations and elements of COVID-19, as well as to integrate gender impacts and implications of COVID-19 in prevention and response plans, budgets, programmes and coordination mechanisms. Support to national counterparts on disaggregated data by sex and age are available in **Georgia** through the government website 'StopCov.ge' and the '112 service' COVID-19 app. The Police Development Department in **North Macedonia** is using official statistics to monitor reported increases in crimes of violence against women during the lockdown, and the Ministry of Defense, as a front-line responder, is analysing how women in the Ministry and Army are being affected by COVID-19. Multisectoral gender analyses (on impacts of the crisis on women and girls using data disaggregated by sex, age, disability and other relevant vulnerability factors) are beginning to provide an evidence base for policymakers, decision-makers and COVID-19 responders to better understand gender implications, and prepare transformative, inclusive and equitable responses.

b) **To produce gender assessments, research and data on the impact of COVID-19 on women**, we have prioritized investments in sex-disaggregated data collection and gender-sensitive data collection tools. Through our 'Women Count' regional programme, a rapid gender assessment is being rolled out in our focus countries and will provide quick results and comparable data on how COVID-19 is affecting women and men. **Moldova** and **Ukraine** have already rolled out the assessment, with **Kosovo** and **Turkey** next in line. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, data on women's immediate COVID-19 needs, including country-wide safe houses, will be collected. A rapid assessment in the conflict-affected eastern **Ukraine** is collecting data on domestic violence service-providers' responsiveness and will estimate additional risks and challenges faced by survivors due to confinement measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. In **Turkey**, with Koc Holding (one of the biggest conglomerates in the country, which is also a HeForShe champion, signatory of the Women's Empowerment Principles and an employer of 90,000 people), a gender assessment is under discussion to support a gender-sensitive corporate response to COVID-19.

### 3. Wide-scale mobilization of civil society, women's organizations, activists and the private sector in COVID-19 response and recovery

a) **To strengthen the leadership and meaningful participation of women and girls in COVID-19 response**, we are advocating for women's voice, visibility and agency to be central in COVID-19 decision-making, at all levels. This means ensuring that women's expertise, experience and priorities are an integral part of the agenda-setting so that women are engaged as dynamic agents of change, and not just as beneficiaries of COVID-19 response. In **Kyrgyzstan**, our networks of civil society and activists are developing immediate solutions to address GBV and support survivors and those at risk. The UN Women Regional Office in **Europe and Central Asia** with the Regional Civil Society Advisory Groups are developing solutions to ensure gains made on gender equality are not threatened and that women's needs, challenges and solutions are embedded within the forefront of COVID-19 response.

b) **To leverage women-led solutions**, we are mobilizing and strengthening the resilience of grass-roots women to engage in effective community-based social mobilization and building on their pre-existing community networks to access hard-to-reach groups and overcome sociocultural barriers. In **Serbia**, we are engaged with non-governmental organizations in 22 municipalities to provide 24-hour helpline support and online chat options for survivors of violence. In **Ukraine**, grass-roots women are being mobilized into peer-support groups to create virtual 'safe spaces' that will connect survivors of domestic violence and at-risk women and girls, share resources on domestic violence and services available. Through these platforms, women will be engaged in designing safety plans and disseminating information on protection against COVID-19 infection.

c) **To scale up social and community mobilization in COVID-19 response**, we are actively disseminating information on the gender impacts and implications of COVID-19 through our platforms and partners. Such efforts seek to ensure that emergency measures do not undermine gains made in gender equality and women's rights, such as criminal sanctions and restrictive measures imposed in **Ukraine** on perpetrators of GBV and domestic violence, but instead promote respectful relationships and shared domestic and care work. In engagement with grass-roots women networks and

platforms, through our regional programme on ending violence against women and girls in the Western Balkans and Turkey, we are mobilizing communities on COVID-19 and GBV prevention. In **Albania**, a public service announcement will recirculate the existing hotline for domestic violence on national TV. In **Kyrgyzstan**, campaigning will seek to reduce stigma and discrimination around COVID-19. In **Serbia**, 50 municipalities are sending mobile units to reach almost 19,000 most vulnerable men and women, including women living in rural areas, women with disabilities and elderly women. Authorities in conflict-affected areas of eastern **Ukraine** are being supported to raise awareness on available domestic violence services.

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d) **To forge partnerships and solidarity in COVID-19 response and recovery**, we are capitalizing on our wide range of richly nurtured partnerships and associations with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including the public and private sector, government bodies and gender machineries, media, academia, civil society and national and international development partners to ensure a harmonized and multi-sectoral COVID-19 response that synergizes multiple strengths and resources. In **North Macedonia**, male gender champions are developing and disseminating messages on GBV. With Vodafone **Turkey**, we are exploring the possibility of increasing the accessibility of their phone app 'Vodafone Red Light' (*Kırmızı Işık*) for the most vulnerable women and girls at risk of GBV and domestic violence to call for help. With Turkey's Koc Holding's Academy, we are developing a module on the gender aspects of COVID-19 for employees, their families and the public. Over 300 private-sector companies are being mobilized across the region (including in **Georgia, Turkey and Ukraine**) to be at the forefront of COVID-19 responses. Coordinated efforts of the UN family are being ensured with special focus on women in COVID-19 multi-agency and multi-sectoral responses.



## Financial Windows

Based on initial assessments, we will provide targeted support to 18 countries and territories in our region to integrate gender equality and position women at the forefront of COVID-19 responses. We have allocated a portion of our core resources as an emergency measure to provide immediate response to women's emerging needs. We will unlock additional resources by reallocating current programming resources with our partners. A more detailed assessment of needs and funding targets will be available by April 2020, once country-specific gender assessments are finalized and cost estimates are produced.

**Partners can contribute to UN Women through complementary funding mechanisms at the country and regional levels for rapid and flexible responses to COVID-19.**

### Country-level direct funding:

1. Enables partners to channel funds directly to COVID-19 projects in UN Women presence countries
2. Provides targeted assistance to those more at risk of being left behind
3. Directly supports women as change-agents in addressing inequality and leading gender-responsive actions and results
4. Allows local solutions to be designed to reach groups and communities left behind in COVID-19 preparedness and response with local partners, including grass-roots organizations and in coordination with the host government
5. Funds for UN Women's Strategic Note provide a flexible funding mechanism to address the immediate, medium- and shorter-term responses, under a wider programmatic focus.



### Regional-level direct funding:

Enables partners to channel funds to COVID-19 responses within regional and multi-country programmes on:

1. Ending violence against women, by making justice institutions and essential multisectoral support services more accessible to survivors, and through stronger partnerships with civil society
2. Addressing gender-responsive planning and budgeting
3. Making women count, by supporting data and analysis, including on unpaid care work and violence against women
4. Promoting women's economic empowerment and livelihoods and addressing unpaid care work
5. Promoting women's leadership and participation in decision-making (especially by targeting youth)
6. Making innovation and technology work for women and girls, and promoting their representation in the digital and ICT sectors
7. Addressing the gender inequality of risk and promoting community resilience to disasters.