

**UN WOMEN SERIES:**

Putting women at the forefront of  
COVID-19 response in Europe and  
Central Asia



# ASSESSING THE LIGHTS AND SHADOWS OF COVID-19:

A GENDER ANALYSIS OF PANDEMIC-RELATED IMPACTS  
ON WOMEN AND GIRLS IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





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Shortly after the World Health Organization (WHO) classified a newly discovered coronavirus (now known as COVID-19) as a global pandemic, the UN Secretary-General voiced concern that the impending crisis was threatening to undo the progress made towards achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the measures taken to address it, have in fact exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and widened gender gaps in every sphere. Women and girls have been disproportionately impacted due to multiple and intersecting forms of inequality and discrimination that predated the pandemic.

UN Women has been documenting the gendered impacts of the pandemic through consultations with experts from institutional mechanisms for gender equality and women's civil society organizations, and a series of rapid gender assessments of the situation of women and men in the countries/territories of the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region.

As the region now moves into longer-term recovery and countries/territories are planning for the post-COVID phase, key opportunities to 'build back better' must be seized. Inclusivity is at the heart of building back better, and this requires both gender-specific support and closing long-standing gender gaps. The ECA region is at a critical juncture in which efforts should be taken to avoid reproducing the gender inequalities that predated the pandemic. Rather, progress towards closing gender gaps should be accelerated. Commitments to build back better must be based on a clear understanding of the factors that were limiting progress before the outbreak. In other words, the impacts of rollbacks in terms of gender equality and women's rights brought about by COVID-19 must be framed through an analysis of the pre-pandemic context.

This gender analysis identifies the most significant impacts of the pandemic on gender equality in the

ECA region. The goal is to inform the implementation of gender-sensitive national COVID-19 response, recovery, planning and investment across the region. The full publication examines five areas that were identified as priorities for Europe and Central Asia during the 2019 Regional Review Meeting on implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (Beijing+25). There is evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has already begun to erode past progress in each of these five priority areas. For each priority, the following questions are asked:

- What were the most persistent gender gaps before the COVID-19 outbreak in the ECA region?
- What factors are restricting women's rights and holding back progress towards gender equality?
- Where have rollbacks been observed during the COVID-19 outbreak?
- What are the implications of this backsliding in terms of widening gender gaps even further and pushing women and girls, as well as men and boys, into situations of vulnerability?
- What should be the priority action areas for recovery in order to mitigate the negative consequences of the pandemic?
- Which measures should be taken to address COVID-19, with the ultimate aim of tackling long-standing gender inequalities?

Here, a summary of conclusions is provided for each priority area, detailing the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for countries/territories – both for fully implementing the Beijing Platform for Action and for staying on-track to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Key actions for sustainable recovery are summarized here, with more detailed recommendations for action included in the full report.

**PRIORITY 1:****Improving data collection and gender statistics****Implications of the COVID-19 pandemic**

The production, analysis and dissemination of sex-disaggregated data and gender statistics is a weakness across the ECA region that predates COVID-19. This occurs despite the existence of gender mainstreaming and national laws that refer to improving official data collection. Critical data gaps stem from the fact that official data often do not exist for particular issues that have become increasingly relevant during the pandemic. For example, women's and men's engagement in informal labour, how much time they devote to unpaid care work, the representation of women and men as individual entrepreneurs or owners of micro-sized enterprises (as well as non-registered businesses), and the prevalence of various forms of violence against women and girls.

Not only are sex-disaggregated data limited thematically, but data that are further disaggregated by other characteristics are almost non-existent outside of small-scale and specialized surveys. This includes data disaggregated by characteristics such as age, place of residence [rural/urban], education level, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation/identity, etc. Limited technical capacity, lack of adequate financing and lack of political will have held back progress in improving data-collection. As a

consequence of having only limited gender-sensitive data, significant disparities are often obscured and, in turn, policymaking is not evidence-based.

The global pandemic is threatening to widen gender gaps, but without baseline data, it will be difficult to measure and monitor the loss of progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. COVID-19 has also put much of the core work of national statistical agencies, as well as researchers, on hold temporarily, which has complicated the process of capturing data about the gender-specific impacts of the pandemic and also of subsequent measures, policies and relief efforts.

**Actions to support sustainable recovery**

Improving data collection, including generating sex- and age-disaggregated data and gender statistics, must be at the core of response and recovery efforts. In order to support efforts to produce relevant gender statistics, gender-sensitive surveys (at the regional, national and subnational levels) should be used to assess the impacts of COVID-19. Technical support is also needed to increase the capacity of national statistical offices to mainstream gender into relevant surveys, conduct surveys with a gender perspective and to produce gender statistics.

**PRIORITY 2:****Empowering women as leaders and decision-makers****Implications of the COVID-19 pandemic**

Special measures, such as gender quotas, have helped to increase women's representation in national parliaments, but the ECA region as a whole has not achieved gender balance in decision-making. Women are also underrepresented in Cabinet positions and tend to be concentrated in ministries with mandates on health, labour or social protection, rather than ministries of defence, justice or emergency situations. Gender equality mechanisms, with mandates to

coordinate gender policy, are recognized within government structures, yet their authority is limited. Likewise, mechanisms for the formal engagement of women's civil society organizations (CSOs) in government processes are underdeveloped or not routinely used.

Women's absence from key decision-making offices was starkly demonstrated by the fact that COVID-related national task forces and inter-ministerial councils in the ECA region were formed with sparse

women's representation. Key duty-bearers, such as national gender equality bodies, were also not included as members of such task forces. Other mechanisms – such as national action plans on women, peace and security and national platforms for disaster risk reduction that include provisions for women's participation in crisis management – seem to have rarely been activated when planning emergency responses to COVID-19. CSOs have fulfilled important functions in reaching marginalized groups during the crisis, but women's organizations in the ECA region also report that they were largely omitted from government emergency planning when national pandemic plans were drafted.

The lack of engagement with gender experts when emergency measures and social protection schemes were initiated contributed to COVID-19 responses that were gender insensitive at best and gender-blind at worst.

### **PRIORITY 3:** **Reducing economic insecurity**

#### **Implications of the COVID-19 pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted public health, while the emergency measures associated with the outbreak are threatening the world's economies. Already there are indications that the pandemic has had distinct gendered impacts on the economic security of women and men, widening the socioeconomic divide. The more acute impacts of the pandemic on women and girls reflect long-standing and entrenched gender disparities in access to economic resources.

Women's engagement in labour markets of the ECA region is low compared to that of men and women in other regions. Whereas over 70 per cent of working-age men are actively engaged in the labour market (meaning they are either working or looking for work), the same can be said for only 45 per cent of working-age women. Women's lower level of engagement in the workforce is directly related to their role in unpaid domestic and care work that in much of the ECA

#### **Actions to support sustainable recovery**

As the ECA region moves towards recovery, women's views and priorities must be equally represented in decision-making and planning for the post-COVID period. Measures are needed to ensure the meaningful participation of women in key decision-making bodies and also to consult with other experts in the design of gender-sensitive recovery and economic stimulus packages. In order to support women's leadership in general, as well as in response and recovery efforts in particular, women must be included in the leadership of COVID-19-related task forces and in other government structures. Further actions are also needed to mainstream gender into policymaking and budgeting processes, as well as to formalize processes for consultation with gender experts, from national gender equality mechanisms, civil society sector, academia and the private sector.

region cannot be reconciled with formal employment. Women are at greater risk of economic dependency and poverty. Furthermore, in the context of post-COVID economic downturns, no country/territory can afford to have a large portion of working-age women out of the workforce.

Women's specific position in labour markets before the pandemic has put them at greater risk for long-term loss of income and unemployment or underemployment. For example, due to the gendered segregation of occupations seen across the ECA region, women make up the majority of employees in health care, education and social services sectors, whereas men are dominant in more diverse fields that tend to be technology-based and associated with higher pay, such as construction, engineering and transport. These patterns have proven to be especially significant during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women also occupy many jobs that would not have previously been considered front-line occupations in times of emergency (not only in health care and

social work, but also in essential retail services such as supermarkets and pharmacies).

At the same time, the sectors in which women predominate as employees and small-business-owners – such as hospitality, leisure and personal services, catering and food preparation, and tourism – have been those hardest-hit by widespread closures and measures required to maintain social distancing. The likelihood that women or men became unemployed or had to take unpaid leave in the period of April–May 2020 differed by country/territory. However, in half of ECA countries/territories, women were more likely than men to have experienced reductions in paid working hours.

Women entrepreneurs (including the self-employed) were in an especially precarious position during the pandemic, based on underlying conditions prior to COVID. Women tend to operate micro and small-sized enterprises in ‘feminized’ sectors that were hard-hit by shutdowns. These patterns of female entrepreneurship reflect women’s more limited access to key financial, material, relational and time resources, as well as gender stereotypes. They also suggest that women-owned businesses may struggle to reopen and to remain solvent, even as lockdowns ease, because of new health protection measures in place. In fact, during the COVID-19 pandemic, self-employed men and women experienced greater job losses and reductions in working hours than those in other forms of employment. Even though there are fewer self-employed women, they were more severely impacted by job loss (a quarter of all self-employed women participating in UN Women’s rapid gender assessments reported that they had lost their jobs). Self-employed men, however, were more likely to report a reduction in working hours.

The ECA region is characterized by a high level of informal employment for both men and women, mainly in agriculture, construction (for men) and domestic services (for women). The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that globally, women informal workers are likely to feel the impacts of economic restrictions during COVID-19 more

acutely than men working informally. In the ECA region, up to 45 per cent of domestic workers were estimated to be at risk of losing their jobs during the pandemic. The pandemic has also disrupted labour migration. Historically, young men have made up the majority of labour migrants from the ECA region, but these patterns are changing. When internal migration is considered, labour migration is becoming increasingly feminized in some countries/territories. Labour migrants who have lost work in destination countries and returned home are putting pressure on governments to increase local employment opportunities. At the same time, the loss of remittance income, documented in April–May 2020, is a problem facing a larger proportion of women than men – particularly women who depend on funds sent by male labour migrants who have not been able to work.

The prospects for young people to transition from education to work in the post-COVID period will depend on whether they are able to gain the knowledge and skills most in demand in changing labour markets. As observed before the pandemic, young men more easily transitioned from school to paid work, as compared to their female counterparts. Young women make up the larger share of those not in education, employment or training (NEET). Up to 30 per cent of women aged 15–24 are in this category in South-Eastern Europe and Central Asia, as compared to between 12 and 16 per cent of men in the same age group across the ECA region. The primary reason for women’s inactivity in education or work is family/household responsibilities. Young women often become ‘trapped’ in economic inactivity, despite their desire to enter or re-enter the labour market. This is an underlying concern that has become even more relevant in light of disruptions to education, job losses and economic downturns brought about by COVID-19.

The fact that girls and young women have more limited access to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) than their male peers likely reduces their prospects to gain much-needed qualifications. Additionally, girls and women are underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics

(STEM) subjects at all levels of education. As seen during the pandemic, the digital economy is growing in size and importance, and it has the potential to create jobs and open opportunities for entrepreneurs. In order to take advantage of economic opportunities, however, digital literacy has become vital in the post-COVID future. Without improving opportunities for girls and women to gain relevant technical skills, especially in STEM, women may find that they are not competitive candidates in the job market.

### Actions to support sustainable recovery

Past crises have demonstrated that women are disproportionately impacted by economic downturns. They are more likely to lose work and experience longer periods of unemployment. The factors that underpinned women's lack of economic empowerment before the pandemic must therefore be addressed if women are to fully contribute to their

local and national economies. Measures must support women's access to decent work (including to enter or to re-enter employment), as well as opportunities for entrepreneurship and economic empowerment in the context of COVID-19 response and recovery. In doing so, actions must be taken to capitalize on any of the flexible working arrangements used during the pandemic that could benefit women to enter or return to the labour market and to improve the work-life balance for women and men. Special measures are needed during the recovery period to support women entrepreneurs, not only to recover from the impacts of emergency measures but also to address unresolved barriers to their engagement in business. Priority should also be given to ensuring that young women, especially those who are neither in education nor economically active (in the NEET category), are supported to enter decent and skilled work and do not fall further behind as a consequence of the pandemic.

## PRIORITY 4:

### Addressing unpaid care and domestic work

#### Implications of the COVID-19 pandemic

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, women were spending on average three times more time on unpaid household and care work than men. However, women's activities have not been widely recognized as 'work' at all, even though they contribute the equivalent of 10 to 39 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) globally, which may be a larger contribution to the economy than the manufacturing, commerce or transportation sectors. The burden of unpaid work has a direct impact on women's hours in paid employment and results in overall 'time poverty,' meaning it robs women of time they could devote to running a business, engaging in political activities, furthering their education and training, or doing volunteer work or leisure activities. Accessible and affordable early childhood education and care is one of the most important factors that determines whether women with children will be in employment. For the ECA region as a whole, fewer than 50 per cent of children, on average, attend early childhood

education (defined as nurseries, kindergartens and preschools). This situation reflects the fact that public investment in early childhood education facilities has not been prioritized. In contrast, economic analysis indicates that the returns from increasing public expenditures in early childhood education and care are multiple, ranging from generating new jobs for women in the sector to boosting women's overall levels of employment, while raising government revenues to the point that early childhood education and care becomes self-financing.

The imposition of COVID-19 emergency measures – including social distancing, working from home and the temporary closure of childcare centres and schools, recreational facilities, shops and restaurants – has increased unpaid domestic workloads, childcare and homeschooling dramatically, with the greater share of the burden falling on women. Indeed, findings from UN Women rapid gender assessments indicate that in April–May 2020 women were considerably more likely to be working remotely (44 per cent of

female respondents versus only 28 per cent of male respondents reported that they had been able to switch to working from home).

Regardless of the specific working arrangements in individual households in the ECA region, on average 70 per cent of women spent more time on unpaid domestic work in April–May 2020 than the 59 per cent of men who reported such an increase. Women's increased care responsibilities coincided with reduced access to food, medicine and other critical goods. As a result, women have been forced to reduce their working hours or to extend the total hours they devote to work to unsustainable levels. Women's lost productivity is likely to negatively impact their careers going forward, potentially leading to lay-offs and reducing their opportunities for promotion.

The fact that men reported that they also spent more time on unpaid domestic work (mainly in childcare) during lockdown periods, compared to previous months or years, is a positive development. Institutionalized support for fathers to take paid paternity leave is underdeveloped in the ECA region. Yet, as seen in countries in which fathers more regularly take parental leave, men's exposure to domestic and care work positively impacts their engagement in unpaid work in the long-term. Thus, opportunities should be sought to continue this momentum and

to reduce some of the barriers that prevent men from taking on a greater role in this area, such as lack of flexible paid leave options, discouragement by employers and gender stereotypes.

### Actions to support sustainable recovery

The pandemic has made it impossible to ignore the heavy burden of unpaid work on women and also made visible the critical role played by social safety nets in enabling women to participate in the labour market. Without positive actions to more equitably distribute unpaid care and domestic work, the situation may at best return to pre-crisis levels. At worst, the pattern of women taking on an even greater role in unpaid work, to the detriment of their employment, may become ingrained. Special efforts are needed to support the care economy, such as investment in early childhood education and care (as part of post-COVID recovery planning) and greater involvement of employers in paid parental leave policies and flexible working arrangements for women and men who have care responsibilities. In parallel, efforts are needed to change gendered expectations about the roles that women and men play in their households and at work and to increase awareness of the contribution that unpaid care work makes to economies.

## PRIORITY 5:

### Eliminating violence against women and girls

#### Implications of the COVID-19 pandemic

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is one of the most significant threats to gender equality in the ECA region. Around a quarter of all women will have experienced VAWG in some form during their lifetimes. The measures taken to contain the spread of COVID-19 put women and girls at a high risk of being isolated at home with their abusers, contributing to what has been called a "shadow pandemic."

When stay-at-home orders were implemented, alarm was raised that the "increased stress and economic pressure due to job losses, non-operational or narrowed networks for interaction, and reduced services all put women and children at acute risks of domestic violence."

Indeed, a common pattern observed across the region was an increase in calls to telephone hotlines and law enforcement about domestic violence during lockdown periods, as compared to previous months and years. In this context, the need for high-level coordination, multi-agency response mechanisms and ensuring the accessibility of specialist services became increasingly significant.

Important progress has been made in strengthening the legal and policy frameworks to address VAWG in Europe and Central Asia, yet critical shortcomings remain. Notably, national coordination on VAWG and mechanisms for multisectoral and coordinated response are not effectively implemented in practice. While referral systems and standard operating procedures are in various stages of development and



implementation in the countries/territories of ECA, on the whole, survivors of VAWG are often left unprotected and perpetrators continue to have impunity.

Significant shortcomings in the provision of specialized services for survivors of VAWG predate the COVID-19 outbreak and result in a high level of unmet needs (as well as underreporting of VAWG generally). For instance, in Europe (excluding EU members), it has been estimated that 79 per cent of needed spaces in non-residential centres for women survivors of violence and also in temporary shelters are missing, while there is a 99 per cent gap in services for survivors of sexual violence. Throughout the ECA region, funding for centres for survivors of VAWG is insufficient. Existing centres are generally located in urban areas, and outreach and services accessible to survivors living in rural areas, as well as to those from minority groups, are scarce.

The pandemic has put service-providers, many of which are CSOs, on the front lines and stretched their capacities to meet the basic needs of survivors, while having to reorganize their work to meet social distancing requirements, suspend all but core services and make do without the volunteers on which they usually rely. Without proper assistance, women's CSOs may be reaching the limits of their capacities to operate and to meet newly arising challenges, including the challenge of addressing emerging forms of VAWG that appear to have spiked during lockdown periods (e.g. cyberviolence and human trafficking).

COVID-19 has also brought to light the lack of preparedness of national governments to address the emerging shadow pandemic. Risk assessments for VAWG were not part of the initial planning for emergency measures to address COVID-19. Shortcomings in systems to mobilize resources for the protection of survivors of VAWG became apparent as soon quarantine measures were implemented. For example, in many cases, services and protection mechanisms for women and girls who had experienced violence (e.g. social services and temporary shelter) were initially classified as “non-essential” and reduced or suspended. In addition, law enforcement prevention work on domestic violence was not prioritized and

public awareness campaigns and outreach to potential survivors about what services would remain during lockdowns were not rolled out before the quarantine measures took place. Early on, however, some countries/territories in the ECA region put in place a number of measures to improve outreach to survivors of VAWG and to expand services for their protection.

### Actions to support sustainable recovery

Some of the measures put in place by governments in the ECA region to address the immediate needs of survivors during the pandemic were conceived as temporary, to cover emergencies and lockdown periods. Ensuring the continuity of such services in the post-COVID-19 period will be critical, however. A return to the pre-pandemic level of services, which was already insufficient, must be avoided.

The pandemic has also shown the need for greater attention to VAWG prevention, through a better understanding of risk factors and the use of early warning systems. Studies of the financial burdens of VAWG indicate that it becomes far more costly to respond to VAWG than to prevent it. In the context of potential economic downturns brought about by COVID-19, it will become ever more important to invest in primary prevention and early intervention against all forms of VAWG.

At the same time, increasing national-level coordination to address VAWG, while standardizing referral pathways across all relevant sectors, including CSOs, will be critical to continue the progress that has been made in supporting and empowering survivors of VAWG. Specific actions are needed to guarantee continuity in essential services for survivors of VAWG, during emergency situations and after.

Efforts to address violence against women and girls must also be included in COVID-19 response and recovery. Additionally, programming to combat VAWG should be included in all post-COVID recovery plans, with dedicated situational analysis, special programmes and budgets. The special measures that were taken for the protection of survivors of VAWG during lockdown periods should be scaled up and formalized.

# CONCLUSION

The topics addressed in this gender analysis centre around the potential for the pandemic to push women and girls into greater insecurity, poverty and disempowerment. While the risks of backsliding on progress in protecting women's rights and promoting gender equality should not be ignored, the potential opportunities the pandemic may provide should also be considered. For example, during lockdowns, many daily activities (learning, working, shopping) moved to the digital space, indicating the increasing role that information and communication technologies will play. As governments support digitization, more opportunities could result for women and men, in terms of access to jobs and education.

However, women's unequal access to decent work, predominance in unpaid work and 'fragile' work all contribute to women's lower economic status – a situation that predated the pandemic and which persists across the ECA region. The trends observed in the context of COVID-19 point to the high risk of women falling into income poverty or of being pushed into extreme poverty.

The flexible working arrangements organized during quarantine periods have the potential to enable women to better balance work with other responsibilities in the future, but only if the social safety net is improved to reduce their care obligations. In parallel, schemes that promote flexible work for men are still needed to facilitate their greater engagement in unpaid childcare and domestic work.

The streaming of women towards traditionally 'feminine' fields of study, rather than into STEM subjects, means that the knowledge and skills they gain do not necessarily match today's labour market demands.

Even more so in the post-COVID context, women will not be in the optimal position to compete for jobs in emerging technology-related fields, unless steps are taken – by governments, educational institutions, employers and even parents – to close the gender gaps in STEM.

Finally, persistent violence against women and girls is not only a threat to their safety and a drain on national resources, but it also serves to disempower them more broadly. In the ECA region, women's empowerment deficits are also evident in their more limited influence over formal decision-making. When national emergency task forces did not effectively engage with women leaders or consult with women gender experts when developing their first responses to the COVID-19 outbreak, the result was measures that were often gender insensitive and failed to address the multiple vulnerabilities of women and men. During the pandemic, CSOs have been active in addressing the needs of women and girls at the grass-roots level. Along with national gender mechanisms, they have also been sharing their experience and advocating for gender-sensitive measures to address the impacts of COVID-19. This momentum should not be wasted.

There are now several opportunities to engage with a broad spectrum of gender experts to look more deeply into the various ways that the pandemic has increased gender inequalities – not only to make sure that no further ground is lost but to make use of the crisis to accelerate progress towards gender equality. As UN Women's Executive Director reminds us all, "We must utilize the windows of opportunity created by the pandemic to avoid further rollback, by placing women's leadership and contributions at the heart of resilience and recovery."



**UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.**

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide. It works globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls and stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on four strategic priorities: Women lead, participate in and benefit equally from governance systems; Women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy; All women and girls live a life free from all forms of violence; Women and girls contribute to and have greater influence in building sustainable peace and resilience, and benefit equally from the prevention of natural disasters and conflicts and humanitarian action. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.



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