

CMI! Recommendations on COVID-19 and women's human rights

The first signs of the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 are well-documented¹ and alarmingly clear. It is exacerbating existing inequalities for women, girls, and trans people across the globe, as well as injustices based on race, class, and ability.

It is vital and urgent to ensure that these inequalities are not reinforced and worsened. At the same time, this moment also offers us the potential to profoundly shift systems to significantly improve lives in a way that is usually thought not possible. We have a window to be courageous and creative.

The Count Me In! (CMI!) Consortium² supports the voices and activism of women, girls and trans people, people who are often most marginalised in their communities. Over the past months, CMI! members have been in close contact with partners, allies, and funders to share information, learn, act, and strategise on how to respond to the immediate and longer-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following recommendations speak to actions Governments and Funders can take towards realising more humane, sustainable, just and joyous futures.

- 1. *Treat GBV services as essential and fund women's rights organisations (WROs) to address the alarming increase now. This includes a) publicly speaking out against the violence and b) recognising GBV-response work as an essential, basic service.***

There are rapid surges in domestic violence/gender-based violence/violence against women, girls and trans people across the world right now³. Particular groups such as LGBTQ people and women with disabilities face particular risks.⁴ Restrictions on mobility ('social distancing', self-isolation, 'lockdown', quarantines, etc.) increase vulnerability to violence and abuse, as people cannot exit the situation, and increases the need for accessible protection services. This surge in violence against women and girls had happened before with other pandemics, and we should learn lessons from them.⁵ Because such services are currently usually provided by women's rights organisations, and not governments and the public sector in most countries and contexts, resourcing women's rights organisations (WROs) to sustain and strengthen their activity through the pandemic period is critical and should be part of any response package.

¹ An overview of gendered analyses can be found [here](#); and [here](#). A feminist reading list on care, crisis, and pandemics is available [here](#). A reading list on black feminist perspectives on COVID19 is [here](#). A repository on feminist analyses and responses can be found [here](#).

² **Count Me In!** is a special joint initiative led by Mama Cash, including the sex worker-led Red Umbrella Fund (RUF), together with the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), CREA, Just Associates (JASS) and Urgent Action Fund – Africa (representing its sister funds in the US and Latin America). The Dutch gender platform WO=MEN is a strategic partner for lobbying and advocacy.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence>; <http://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/1881/vawg-helpdesk-284-covid-19-and-vawg.pdf>

⁴ https://gbvaor.net/sites/default/files/2020-03/Disability%20Considerations%20in%20GBV%20programming%20during%20COVID_Helpdesk.pdf

⁵ <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/pandemics-and-vawg-april2.pdf>

UN Women recommends treating services responding to domestic violence as ‘essential’ during the pandemic.⁶ And the UN Secretary General has actively publicly condemned the violence, which helps shift prevailing norms by challenging governments to lead differently on this issue in their COVID-19 response work.⁷

2. *Protect and sustain women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and the work of WROs, feminist movements and civil society.*

Governments have been announcing emergency laws and policies to deal with the pandemic⁸. UN experts, special rapporteurs⁹ and others have called for such measures to be necessary, proportionate, non-discriminatory and temporary. Still, there are risks involved in these measures, arising from either their substance¹⁰ or the procedures by which they are implemented, including additional risks to those already facing inequalities.¹¹ Attacks on people by governments in an effort to support public health measures must be categorically denounced.¹² There is already evidence that such measures are (in some cases deliberately) affecting civic space¹³, human rights¹⁴, are being used to target Human Rights Defenders (HRDs)¹⁵, and that WHRDs are facing particular risks¹⁶.

In addition, some governments are using the situation to try and bring in/push through new laws and policies that violate human rights, at a time when civil society’s ability to mobilise and challenge them is curtailed, partly because decision making, along with all of our bodies, has moved, even further, behind closed doors, and the right to public assembly has been suspended. This has already happened in Hungary (on trans people’s rights¹⁷) and Poland (on abortion¹⁸).

Furthermore, as activism moves online, the need to deepen the understanding of online spaces, how they are gendered, and how to support activists to be secure in these spaces is imperative. Addressing activists’ holistic security is of vital importance.

6 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/3/news-women-and-covid-19-governments-actions-by-ded-bhatia>

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

8 <https://creaworld.org/announcements/crea-reflection-covid-19>

9 <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25722&LangID=E>

10 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/30/world/europe/coronavirus-governments-power.html>

11 <http://www.rwuk.org/advocacy-2/rights-and-security-international-publishes-the-emergency-powers-and-crisis-responses-human-rights-risk-a-toolkit-for-civil-society-partners-april-2020/>

12 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2020/apr/02/shoot-them-dead-extreme-covid-19-lockdown-policing-around-the-world-video-report>

13 <https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/>

14 https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/dygbxk/these-30-regimes-are-using-coronavirus-to-repress-their-citizens

15 <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/defending-rights-during-pandemic-impact-covid-19-safety-and-work-human-rights>

16 https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_women_9_april_2020.pdf

17 <http://en.hatter.hu/news/hungarian-government-proposes-bill-to-ban-legal-gender-recognition-amid-covid-chaos>

18 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/14/concerns-over-polish-government-tightening-abortion-laws-during-covid-19-crisis>

3. **Ensure that funding commitments in support of women's rights and gender equality are at the center of forward looking plans to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.**
 - a. *To ensure that current inequalities are not reinforced or made worse, or that new ones are created, put women's rights and gender equality at the center of COVID-19 responses.*
 - b. *Channel urgently needed, larger and rapid response sums to a diversity of WROs to sustain civil society and civic space.*
 - c. *Provide core and flexible funding so that organisations can adapt and respond to changing circumstances swiftly. Ensure due diligence practices and expectations are aligned so that groups do not have to spend significant time on onerous reporting.*
 - d. *Use innovative and tested mechanisms to reach local WROs, such as women's funds. By working nationally, regionally, globally as well as thematically, women's funds respond to the needs of local feminist activists and their movements.*

It is becoming clear that the economic implications of COVID-19 into the future will be serious. Importantly, countries that currently may not be a priority for international development because of their GDPs may be facing increases in poverty rates that will necessitate new approaches to international cooperation. The recently released report from the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean signals this already¹⁹.

Feminist movements are already innovating in their tactics to counter efforts to curtail women's human rights²⁰ and need sustained support, especially given the context detailed above. Funders of these movements, like women's funds, have built considerable expertise in reaching and resourcing WROs throughout various cycles of crises and opportunities to successfully shift norms, practices, and laws²¹, and are doing so again, now²².

4. **Increase the number of women in decision-making on all aspects of the COVID-19 response, including in fiscal and financial processes.**

Women are under-represented in response decision-making, despite being key to managing the situation. They constitute just 20% of the WHO Emergency Committee on COVID-19, for example.²³ Past experience with Ebola shows that poor attention to taking a gendered approach can result in devastating problems for women such as increased maternal mortality rates.²⁴

It is critical to consult with WROs representing a diversity of constituencies to ensure present and future COVID-19 responses are inclusive of and respond to the needs and priorities of women, girls, and trans people in their respective contexts.

19 <https://www.cepal.org/en/publications/45351-latin-america-and-caribbean-and-covid-19-pandemic-economic-and-social-effects>

20 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/poland-lockdown-protests-force-freeze-on-retrogressive-bills-on-abortion-and-sex-education/>

21 https://ssir.org/articles/entry/philanthropy_for_the_womens_movement_not_just_empowerment

22 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bonniechiu/2020/04/27/gender-justice-funders-lead-the-way-in-providing-flexible-funding/#212b897f19c6>

23 <https://www.womeningh.org/operation-50-50>

24 [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30526-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30526-2/fulltext)

5. **Ensure all new and existing macro-economic policies work for people and planet.**

- a. *Take seriously the need for policy coherence across aid, development and trade policies, and support calls for change of the global financial architecture coming from the Global South, to release the necessary resources for the provision of essential social safety nets.*
- b. *Environmental policies should not be deregulated, but rather accelerated and increased.*
- c. *Provide more funding to grants for debt relief facility - which is currently underfunded.*

Unfair trade, debt and tax policies as well as illicit financial flows have created the conditions of impoverishment and economic austerity in the Global South in which healthcare systems and social safety nets are not able to meet the needs of the people and therefore extend the care burden on women. Emergency funding proposed by IMF and World Bank that could ideally 'help out' in creating safety nets aggravates the debt situation which in the aftermath of the pandemic leaves many more in poverty, especially women, and further strains social services. Scientists and the UN warn that weakening or suspending environmental regulations 'jeopardizes the rights of vulnerable people'.²⁵

As governments seek to reduce the spread of COVID-19 through various forms of 'lockdown', the lack of social safety nets has led to dire consequences for marginalised women, girls and trans people²⁶. There has been a loss of jobs and livelihoods for example for day-waged women, as well as women in the informal sector - such as market and street vendors, small enterprise owners, and garment workers²⁷, which is compounding existing hunger, health and household debt crises.²⁸ In cases where there are social safety nets in place, this often excludes the informal sector, as this is often not recognized by labour laws.²⁹ Yet in the Global South, the informal economy is the primary source of employment for women, especially migrant women. The situation disproportionately affects trans people and sex workers, in their access to basic necessities (food and medication)³⁰. The UN projects that 'the impacts of the COVID19 global recession will result in a prolonged dip in women's incomes and labor force participation, with compounded impacts for women already living in poverty.'³¹

25 <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25794&LangID=E>

26 <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/LGBT/LGBTIpeople.pdf>; https://www.unicef.org/disabilities/files/COVID-19_response_considerations_for_people_with_disabilities_190320.pdf

27 <https://cleanclothes.org/news/2020/live-blog-on-how-the-coronavirus-influences-workers-in-supply-chains>

28 <https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-chief-warns-hunger-pandemic-covid-19-spreads-statement-un-security-council>

29 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/csw61/women-in-informal-economy>

30 <https://www.nswp.org/page/covid-19>; <https://tgeu.org/covid-19/trans-people/>

31 https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_women_9_april_2020.pdf