

Accelerated action and transformative pathways: women as leading forces of sustainable change – Call for joint action in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic

The devastating impact and rapid spread of the coronavirus and the respiratory disease it causes (COVID-19) have made public health responses the absolute priority of governments around the world. Affected countries are struggling to tackle the health risks while mitigating the socio-economic repercussions of confinement, production slowdown and job losses. However, the consequences related to COVID-19 are only starting to unfold and require a global approach, new vision and joint action.

Merely expressing human rights concerns in such an unprecedented situation is not enough. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee) therefore issues this Call for Joint Action. If COVID-19 teaches us only one lesson, this should be that solidarity is neither optional nor is it an act of charity. COVID-19 has shown that none of us is safe unless we are all safe. Solidarity is the strongest means to resist a virus that recognizes no border or status.

The CEDAW Committee would like to seize the opportunity and calls for joint action against the Covid-19 pandemic from a women's rights perspective, and solicits participation from all key stakeholders, and in particular States parties to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Convention). It is thus issuing a [guidance note on CEDAW and COVID-19](#) with practical guidelines for States to mitigate the devastating impact that the pandemic is having more specifically on women and girls. COVID-19 has affected victims regardless of gender, geography, ethnicity, religion, wealth or any other status. However, with our societies being unequal in the first place, the consequences of the current crisis has impacted women in a disproportionate and more severe manner. Women have experienced multiple and compounded forms of discrimination while on the front lines of responses, at home, in the health workforce and in various sectors of production.

While important events and meetings regarding the 25-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing+25 review) such as the 64th session of Commission on the Status of Women and the Generation Equality Forum have been postponed by the pandemic, the Committee calls for concrete actions based on the commitments acknowledged therein as they remain even more valid than ever before, with a sharper focus on the explicit implementation of the articles of the CEDAW Convention.

The world health crisis is a test for governance, leadership and democratic institutions everywhere, for keeping national and international commitments, and adhering to the principles of gender equality, non-discrimination, solidarity, both nationally and internationally. The Committee is fully conscious that no State institution and no leader can do it alone. This is the time for joint action.

In addition, the Committee calls for the conceptualization of support models for stimulating local action in a bottom-up mode based on the strategic premise that in such a global crisis, every local group and individual action counts.

Because of pre-existing gender inequalities, deep-rooted discrimination and feminized poverty, the multifaceted consequences of the current crisis have impacted women more than men, while at the same time placing increased responsibilities on women's shoulders. This disparity requires that governments and international organizations embrace the need for stronger national machineries for the advancement of women with standardized infrastructure for efficiency and effectiveness in the pursuit of global gender policy frameworks and targets. In addition, there is a need to increase support to civil society actors in order to reach all segments of the population and address aspects of the daily lives of women and girls to ensure they receive adequate support. Everywhere in the world, women are among the first victims of crisis, conflicts and rights violations. However, at the same time, they are leading forces of sustainable development and transformative change. The Committee considers that States parties' economic recovery strategies should focus on gender equality as a driving force of sustainable development, in line with Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The actions needed for women's empowerment are numerous. The Committee is engaged in the elaboration of the "CEDAW Knowledge Hub" initiative to make its expertise on women's rights available in creative ways, adapted to the current restrictions on movement and slow-down of the economic and social lives. As the duration, reach and impact of the restrictions occasioned by the pandemic cannot be predicted, the first area of joint action CEDAW calls for is the use of modern technology in, more efficient, accessible, inclusive, gender-sensitive and widespread ways. Artificial intelligence and other innovative technology sectors can play an important role in the ongoing response to the health crisis and may help to shape long-term economic recovery strategies. In this regard, the Committee calls for an inclusive approach, which promotes women's education, training and equal participation in all economic sectors, in line with targets 4.1, 4.3 and 4.4 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

To this end, the Committee is finalizing a prototype of peer-to-peer learning webinars, in collaboration with Religions for Peace and other partners to explore how various faith communities can scale up collaboration around the diverse challenges posed by COVID-19 with a human rights-based approach with respect to women and girls. These webinars will use the [#Faith4Rights toolkit](#)¹ as a resource. The key areas of these online webinars include gender-based violence against women, individual behaviours related to COVID-19, home schooling, working from home, creative modes of local solidarity and responding to discrimination against women in various aspects of public policies. There will be specific focus on young women working in the fields of education, media, technology and women faith actors.

To achieve this, the Committee will also rely on its jurisprudence, which recognizes that education for gender equality and empowerment of women and girls is the most sustainable way to ultimately achieve the objectives of non-discrimination and equality of women and men.²

The Committee supports the appeal of UN Secretary-General António Guterres for a global ceasefire as well as his special appeal to religious leaders of all faiths to focus on the common battle to defeat COVID-19.³ The Committee also appreciates the statement of 19 March 2020

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Press/faith4rights-toolkit.pdf>

² General recommendation No. 36 (2017) on the right of girls and women to education

³ <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/press-encounter/2020-03-23/transcript-of-the-secretary-generals-virtual-press-encounter-the-appeal-for-global-ceasefire> and <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-04-11/the-secretary-generals-special-appeal-religious-leaders>

by Religions for Peace on the Coronavirus Crisis,⁴ stressing the responsibility of faith actors to translate ethical values into concrete actions and offering substantive ideas for learning, teaching, preaching and designing community development projects.

Media reports have shown that incidents of discrimination against women and girls and domestic and gender-based violence have risen due to domestic tensions resulting from confinement, often in poor housing conditions, pressure of accompanying children during home schooling and job losses by women and men, adversely affecting the full implementation of SDGs targets 5.2, 5.3, 4.1, 4.5 and 16.1. The Committee also fears that restrictions imposed due to the health threats could fuel nationalism, populism, xenophobia, as well as compounded and multiple discrimination against women belonging to minority groups of all kinds in particular women at the bottom of the economic ladder, therefore impeding the full achievement of SDGs targets 8.8, 10.2 and 10.7. Self-confinement can ultimately lead to nationalistic tendencies and opposition to multilateralism, contrary to SDGs targets 17.2, 17.3, 17.16 and 17.17. These tendencies pose serious obstacles to the implementation of international human rights standards, including the CEDAW Convention, and may seriously undermine gender equality. Governments have the primary responsibility for steering their countries out of the crisis. Along with civil society and women's rights organizations, they must be very vigilant and push back any such threat. Women's engagement in the political and public sphere and economic responsibilities in all areas, including climate change and the digital field, must be considered as a top priority in the recovery strategies, with the ultimate aim of building a development model that is more respectful of people and their fundamental rights.

At the intergovernmental level, the Committee is concerned that health challenges, economic and budgetary restrictions, border closures and limitations of movement may hamper international solidarity, international cooperation and development aid at a time when they are needed the most, particularly by women and girls. Such trends may deepen poverty and inequalities, notably in countries without robust supporting systems. States should be aware of these risks and honour their duty of international assistance and co-operation to ensure the full achievement of SDG 1, to end poverty in all its forms everywhere.

States should also regularly assess and monitor the gendered consequences and impact of the pandemic, collect and analyze data, and plan to sustain and further promote gender equality also for the period after the health crisis. This is part of their obligations under the CEDAW Convention and requires a fit-for purpose national apparatus and robust gender infrastructure.

The efficient functioning of national machineries for the advancement of women and related gender equality mechanisms and national human rights institutions, are often fragile, under-skilled, under-funded, lacking appropriate architecture, authority or regulatory powers for effective oversight, surveillance or impact monitoring. They are further hampered in their mandates during crises. States have to engage and sustain these mechanisms and develop them further during and after the COVID-19 crisis, in line with SDGs indicator 16.A. States should neither undermine, sideline nor reduce financial resources for gender equality but, conversely, use the opportunity to overhaul their operations, plan and effect further investments in this area. These steps will be essential for ensuring the implementation of SDG Goal 16 and subsequently gender equality and empowerment of women and women's

⁴ <https://rfp.org/statement-by-religions-for-peace-on-coronavirus-crisis/>

leadership and integral participation in decision-making in the period of “convalescence” of societies.

The Committee holds the strong opinion that these unprecedented times are also an opportunity for change guided by the principle of “Leave no one behind” of the Sustainable Development Goals, recognizing that women and national machineries for the advancement of women are central to response and recovery strategies. National human rights institutions, the UN System, the UN human rights treaty bodies and special procedures may join forces in order to show a way forward for both States and civil society actors. The CEDAW Knowledge Hub initiative, with its imminent webinars about women rights, will be the signature contribution of CEDAW to a new thinking and joint action. The Committee invites all relevant stakeholders, including the private sector, to join in this initiative and hopes that it will lay the foundations, in collaboration with other relevant stakeholders, for a positive and enabling post COVID-19 environment that actualizes the principal lessons of the virus: no one is safe unless all are safe.

The Committee calls on States to strive for grasping this moment in human history as an opportunity to adopt transformative strategies based on women’s empowerment and leadership, especially in the area of digital technologies and artificial intelligence. The Committee further recommends targeted strategies for governments to mitigate the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on older women, women and girls with disabilities, women in detention, migrant, refugee and internally displaced women and those belonging to other disadvantaged groups.

In their response to the crisis, States parties to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women must be guided by its principles of non-discrimination and gender equality, as well as by the principle of ‘Leave no one behind’ of the Sustainable Development Goals. Ultimately, States should emerge from the COVID-19 crisis with increased solidarity, by adhering to human rights norms, promoting inclusive governance, social justice and peace.