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Strategic Inter-parliamentary Dialogue Gender-responsive recovery post COVID-19

Hosted by the IPU and organized jointly with UN Women

A series of online meetings from 7 to 21 April 2021

Draft Concept Note

Context and rationale

The impacts of crises are never gender neutral, and the COVID-19 crisis is no exception. Beyond the public health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a full-fledged economic and social crisis. Rampant inequalities have once again been revealed and further exacerbated. As outlined in [From Insights to Action: Gender Equality in the Wake of COVID-19](#), a recent report by UN Women, the economic and social fallouts are felt hard by women and girls as they are more vulnerable in the hard-hit economic sectors. Lockdown measures and economic pressure have further amplified the violence against women and girls (VAWG) – the shadow pandemic.

The Beijing Platform for Action – the global blueprint for gender equality – and the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 1995 and 2015 respectively, continue to be relevant roadmaps for action. It is more crucial than ever to achieve them. Without coordinated action to mitigate the gendered impacts of COVID-19, there is a risk that the fragile gender equality gains achieved over the past 25 years will be lost.

Parliaments, through coordinated action, are in a unique position to contribute to the political will to achieve gender-responsive legislation, provide oversight of government actions and resource allocation, as well as to mobilize society in its gender-responsive recovery.

Prioritizing women's economic empowerment

Women typically earn less and hold less secure jobs than men. With plummeting economic activity, women are particularly vulnerable to layoffs and loss of livelihoods. The income of women working in the informal sector has declined dramatically. It has been estimated that during the first month of the pandemic informal workers worldwide lost an average of 60 per cent of their income. Some of the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic are feminized sectors characterized by low pay and poor working conditions, including lack of basic worker protection, such as paid sick and family leave.¹

Women on the front lines are more affected by COVID-19 and too many women are sacrificing their health for economic security. Women make up 70 per cent of the health and social care workforce in the world, and are more likely to be front-line health workers, especially nurses, midwives and community health workers.²

Women's lesser access to land, financial capital and other assets makes it harder for them to weather a crisis, bounce back and rebuild their small businesses. Emerging evidence from UN Women's rapid gender-assessment surveys in Europe and Central Asia highlight the impacts of the pandemic on self-employed women and men. While men are more likely to see their working hours reduced (54% of men vs. 50% of women), more women have lost their jobs or businesses as a result of COVID-19 (25% of women vs. 21% of men).³

The impacts of COVID-19 are, and will continue to be, felt most harshly by women already living in difficult and/or disadvantaged circumstances. These include but are not limited to: refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons, migrant women, women with disabilities, women living with

¹ UN Women, 2020.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

chronic health conditions adolescent girls and young women who already suffer from gender-based inequalities.

A gender-aware response to COVID-19 requires greater support and social protection for women workers, including:

- Investments in universal, gender-responsive social protection systems to support women's income security.
- Expanded access to affordable, quality childcare services to enable women to remain in or (re)enter the workforce.
- Reversal of long-standing inequalities, including unequal division of work at home, the gender pay gap and pervasive undervaluation of work done by women.
- Reconciling paid and unpaid work.

According to a new analysis commissioned by UN Women and UNDP, by 2021 around 435 million women and girls will be living on less than US\$ 1.90 a day – including 47 million pushed into poverty as a result of COVID-19. As more women than men live in poverty, closing the gender poverty gap must be a vital part of a broader poverty eradication strategy. Applying a gender lens in designing fiscal stimulus packages and social assistance programmes is crucial for building a more prosperous, equal, inclusive and resilient society.⁴

At their Summit held in August 2020, women Speakers of Parliament stressed that women's economic empowerment started with equality in law that must regulate the status of women and girls in society. They called upon States to address the unequal share of unpaid care work and gaps in social protection, and to eliminate the gender pay gap. They also called for more robust efforts to combat early marriage and other harmful practices such as female genital mutilation to protect and thus empower girls.

Putting an end to VAWG is a sine qua non for recovery

An estimated 243 million women and girls aged 15 to 49 worldwide have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence by an intimate partner in the last year.⁵ Emerging data show that violence against women and girls has intensified since the outbreak of COVID-19. At the same time, women have less income, fewer opportunities for social contact, and limited access to services and community support, all of which give them fewer exit options. The risks are likely higher for women of vulnerable groups and marginalized communities, migrant and refugee women, and for women with disabilities.

Evidence from previous pandemics reveals increased violence against female health workers, online violence, femicide, harmful practices, racial and ethnic discrimination, and violence. Services for survivors of violence must be part of the pandemic response. Safe access to support services and emergency measures, including legal assistance and judicial remedies, is urgently needed, but it has been curtailed amid lockdowns in some countries.

Measures to protect women from violence must be a standard part of responses to the pandemic, as well as longer-term recovery packages. These include:

- Placing a high priority on police and justice responses to overcome all obstacles and ensure survivors' safety and offenders' accountability.
- Ensuring that services for survivors are regarded as essential, remain open, and are adequately resourced.
- Making urgent and flexible funding available for women's rights organizations and recognizing their role as first responders.
- Supporting health and social services to continue providing care to survivors and remain accessible.
- Setting up effective complaint and investigation mechanisms, foreseeing disciplinary sanctions against perpetrators.
- Condemning and sanctioning any acts of harassment, intimidation and violence against women in parliament, including online and in social media, and carrying out surveys to reveal the prevalence of such acts.
- Enforcing a zero-tolerance policy towards any act of sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliament.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is rising in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been estimated by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) that, in the first six months of lockdown, as many as 31 million new incidents of SGBV may have occurred. These acts include conflict-related sexual violence, such as rape and gang rape by weapons bearers, enforced prostitution and sexual slavery. The IPU and the Office of the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict (SRSG-SVC) are joining forces to support parliaments in their response to conflict-related sexual violence. The details of this cooperation will be given at the Strategic Inter-parliamentary Dialogue.

Driving gender-responsive action in parliament

With COVID-19, new modalities of work and functioning are needed to ensure that parliaments carry out their key role in gender equality achievement.

In times of crisis, parliaments cannot ignore gender equality. It is crucial that parliaments adapt their work to the new realities imposed by COVID-19 and that their decisions and actions are gender responsive. The crisis can and should be an opportunity to fast-track decisions, processes and working methods to have parliaments continue being or become a gender-sensitive institution.

Parliamentarians have a critical role in ensuring gender-responsive COVID-19 recovery through gender-sensitive parliaments in general and gender-responsive legislation in particular. On average, women have just three-fourths of the legal rights afforded to men.⁶ Discriminatory laws affect more than 2.5 billion women and girls around the world.

Advancing parliamentary action in gender-responsive legal reform requires support and sharing of experiences and good practices on the matter. A UN Women/IPU handbook for parliamentarians on making legislation gender responsive will be launched during the Strategic Inter-parliamentary Dialogue. The purpose of the handbook is to assist parliamentarians around the world to reflect on the importance of repealing existing discriminatory laws, identify practical approaches to enacting more effective and equal legal protections for men and women in all their diversity, support parliamentarians to identify entry-points and good practice approaches to progressing meaningful and timely law reform in support of gender equality.

The IPU's guidance note for parliaments on gender and COVID-19⁷ also provides recommendations for parliaments on how to manage the crisis. It offers examples from some parliaments that can help guide parliaments in promoting: women's participation and leadership in parliamentary decision-making on COVID-19; gender-responsive COVID-19 legislation; oversight of government action on the pandemic from a gender perspective; and implementing gender-sensitive and gender-responsive adaptation of parliamentary functioning and work. Also, the UN Women's primer for parliamentary action on gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19⁸ highlights practical ways members of parliament and parliamentary staff can take action to ensure COVID-19 response and recovery decision-making address women's needs.

Objectives

The aim of the Strategic Inter-parliamentary Dialogue is to:

- Build knowledge and a common understanding among parliamentarians from different countries and genders on the impact of COVID-19 on the advancement of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls globally.
- Identify legislative, oversight and budgetary parliamentary actions for gender-responsive recovery policies and strategies.

⁶ World Bank, *Women, business and the law 2019* (Washington, 2019).

⁷ Available at: <https://www.ipu.org/file/9041/download>.

⁸ UN Women, "A primer for parliamentary action: Gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19" (New York, 2020).

- Identify best means to carry out gender-responsive legal reforms in and through the work of parliament, including by using the new IPU-UN Women handbook for parliaments on gender-responsive legal reform.
- Support peer to peer exchanges of experiences, good practices, lessons learned and advice to establish common strategies for parliamentary action.
- Inspire parliamentary actions for more gender-responsive recovery with due consideration of different national contexts and specific needs.
- Support the implementation of international commitments, including the Beijing Declaration, the SDGs, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), ILO Conventions, including the recently adopted ILO Violence and Harassment Convention No. 190 on the elimination of all forms of violence and harassment in the world of work, including gender-based violence, supplemented with Recommendation No. 206 on violence and harassment.
- Contribute, via the Bureau and Forum of Women Parliamentarians and other IPU bodies, to mainstreaming gender equality in the deliberations and decisions of the 142nd Assembly of the IPU (24-28 May 2021), which will focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Contribute a parliamentary perspective to global processes and initiatives such as Generation Equality Forum) and Equality in law for women and girls by 2030: A UN Women Multi-Stakeholder Strategy.

Methodology

The Strategic Inter-parliamentary Dialogue is conducted by the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians on behalf of the IPU Forum of Women Parliamentarians which is an IPU's permanent body that guides the Organization's decisions and work on gender equality and women's rights and empowerment. It consists of a series of online meetings on the following themes:

- Women's economic empowerment
- Violence against women and girls
- Gender-responsive legal reform and gender-responsive parliamentary adaptation

The online meetings will be moderated to facilitate discussions, the sharing of good practices, and to allow peer to peer exchanges among the participants. They are co-organized by the IPU and UN Women. Other international organizations and bodies will be involved, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the UN Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (the CEDAW Committee).

The online meetings are scheduled every week between 7 and 21 April 2021 using Interprefy.

Simultaneous interpretation will be provided in: English, French, Spanish and Arabic.

Participants

The number of participants is limited to about 100 persons. The following are invited to take part in the online meetings:

- Members of the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians
- Men and women members of parliament who chair parliamentary committees on gender equality, human rights and economic and financial affairs
- Men and women members of parliament who are office holders in IPU bodies and structures (Standing Committees, geopolitical groups, Executive Committee, other committees and groups)
- Other members of parliament interested to attend.
- Parliamentary staff
- High-level representatives of international organizations, NGOs, the private sector, and academia.

The participation of men is essential to ensure a wide range of perspectives in the discussions.

Online meetings procedure

Each online meeting will include:

1. A research- and evidence-based briefing on the impact of COVID-19 in each of the themes listed above.
2. A moderated session on sharing of good practices on gender-responsive measures taken in different countries.
3. A moderated discussion on identifying priorities and strategies for parliamentary action both nationally and globally.
4. Wrap-up and recap of main findings and take-aways.

Timeline

	Topic	Date
1.	Women's Economic Empowerment	7 April 2021
2.	Violence against women and girls	14 April 2021
3.	Gender-sensitive parliaments and gender-responsive legal reforms	21 April 2021