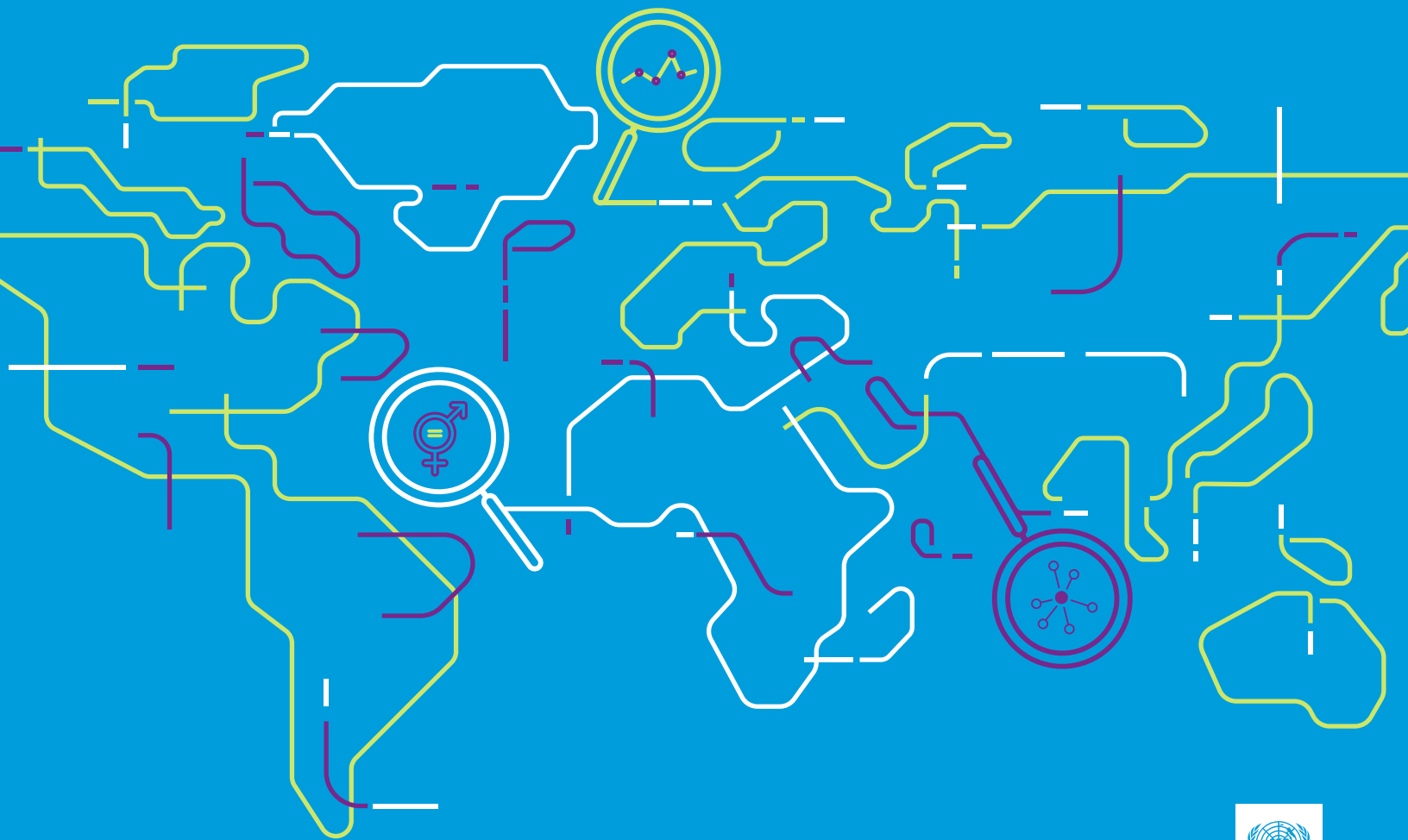# GOVERNMENT RESPONSES
TO COVID-19:

Lessons on gender equality for a world in turmoil

Summary

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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. Learn more at unwomen.org or follow @UN_Women.

UNDP is the leading United Nations organization fighting to end the injustice of poverty, inequality, and climate change. Working with our broad network of experts and partners in 170 countries, we help nations to build integrated, lasting solutions for people and planet. Learn more at undp.org or follow at @UNDP.

TRACKING GENDER EQUALITY IN GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO COVID-19

Since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020, it has claimed more than 6 million lives,[1] destroyed countless livelihoods and forced the global economy to its knees. With an end still not in sight, the crisis has taken a disproportionate toll on women and girls, seen in spiralling levels of violence, a precipitous loss of employment and increased and unmanageable loads of unpaid care work.

How did governments around the world respond to these challenges? What kind of measures did they put in place to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic on women and girls? And what can we learn from the gaps, bottlenecks and good practices in gender-sensitive emergency measures for recovery and future crisis preparedness?

To answer these questions, this report draws on the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker, and a range of other sources, to analyse three main policy areas on which the pandemic demanded answers: violence against women and girls, women's economic security and unpaid care. It also analyses the extent to which women were integrated into decision-making on COVID-19 policy responses.

The report's findings are vital for a retrospective assessment of governments' efforts to mitigate the worst impacts of this unprecedented emergency. But they are perhaps even more important for looking forward, at a time when the world is in turmoil. Just as the pandemic-induced disruptions began to subside, the geopolitical crisis triggered by the invasion of Ukraine has thwarted economic recovery.[2] Meanwhile, the crises of climate and environmental degradation continue to escalate.[3] These multiple and intertwined crises are causing immense human suffering and long-term systemic instability, with especially harsh impacts on low-income countries, and the poorest women and girls within them.

Against this backdrop, the need to ensure that crisis response and strategies for recovery and future preparedness are gender-responsive is more urgent than ever. This report provides a series of concrete recommendations to achieve this and get global targets and commitments on gender equality, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), back on track.

How have government responses stacked up?

This report draws on a unique data set compiled by UNDP and UN Women for the COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker, the most comprehensive global repository of gender-sensitive government responses to the pandemic. The database includes a total of 4,968 measures adopted by governments across 226 countries and territories between March 2020 and August 2021.

Some 1,605 measures across 196 countries and territories were assessed as being gender sensitive. Just over half of these measures focus on stepping up action to address violence against women and girls (VAWG).[4] The global social protection and jobs response, in turn, has been largely blind to women's rights and needs. Women's voices were often missing from COVID-19 decision-making and they held just 24 per cent of seats on COVID-19 task forces. One in 10 task forces had not a single woman in their ranks.

The gender response varied widely across countries and regions. The regions with the highest aggregate number of measures are Europe, Northern America, Australia and New Zealand, which adopted a third of all VAWG measures and almost two-thirds of all unpaid care measures globally. But other regions deserve credit: Latin America and the Caribbean had the second-highest number of gender-sensitive measures, and the largest number of measures targeted at women's economic security, while sub-Saharan Africa came in third.

National income undoubtedly had a huge bearing on governments' capacity to respond: 81 per cent of low-income countries had a weak or no gender response, and the number of measures they took in relation to the pandemic overall was low. This indicates that a lack of fiscal space was a major limitation.

Nevertheless, policy learning and innovation took place even amid constraints. Nine out of 10 gender-sensitive cash transfer programmes were implemented in the Global South, and more than 100 countries used digital tools to step up their response to violence against women and girls.

The report complements data from the tracker with emerging qualitative research and impact assessments by leading feminist researchers, civil society organizations and UN agencies. The result is a rich evidence base from which five headline findings on gender equality and the COVID-19 policy response emerge.

## AS EMERGENCY DECISIONS WERE MADE, WOMEN'S NEEDS WERE RARELY AT THE CENTRE

196 OUT OF 226 countries and territories adopted **at least one** gender-sensitive measure
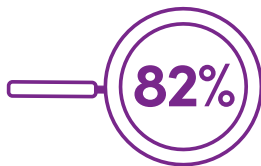
82% of COVID-19 task forces across 130 countries were **dominated by men**

Out of all social protection and labour market measures...

only 12% targeted women's economic security

only 7% supported unpaid care work
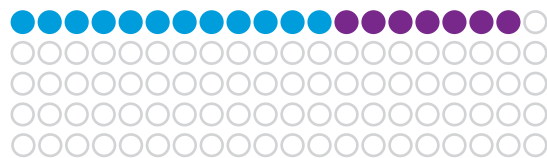
KEY FINDINGS

Violence against women and girls

As COVID-19 spread around the world, it exacerbated a long-standing shadow pandemic of violence against women and girls. Nearly one in two women surveyed for UN Women's rapid gender assessments on VAWG across 13 countries reported that they, or a woman they know, had experienced at least one form of violence since the onset of the pandemic; meanwhile, 7 in 10 women reported that they thought verbal or physical abuse by a partner had become more common.[5]

In response, many countries and territories adopted a range of emergency measures, including digital reporting mechanisms, automatic extension of restraining orders, repurposing of hotels to expand shelter capacity and economic support targeted to violence survivors.

Countries with more robust infrastructure and pre-existing coordination mechanisms for prevention of and response to VAWG were able to adapt and scale up support more quickly, but all countries faced significant challenges and bottlenecks in implementation. Pre-existing barriers to accessing services for women facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination were exacerbated by the pandemic.

A vanishingly small proportion of donor funding went towards ending gender-based violence, and few countries managed to put in place a coordinated multisectoral response, reflecting a significant lack of preparedness. But there were exceptions. Fiji, a country with a history of handling crises caused by extreme weather events, activated its gender-based violence (GBV) Emergency Response Group to coordinate 14 pandemic-related VAWG measures, one of the highest in the world, spanning all critical areas of essential services, awareness-raising, data collection and use, and integration into COVID-19 response plans. This response was enabled through effective partnership between the government, the UN and civil society organizations.

GOVERNMENTS HAVE RESPONDED, BUT MANY GAPS REMAIN

163 COUNTRIES adopted **856 MEASURES** to address violence against women and girls

Only **13 COUNTRIES** mainstreamed VAWG into their COVID-19 response plans

Only **0.0002%** of COVID-19 response funding by major donors went towards ending gender-based violence

Women's economic security

COVID-19 has taken a disproportionate toll on women's jobs and livelihoods. In 2020, women lost 46.6 million jobs globally, a 3.6 per cent loss compared to 2.9 per cent for men.[6] Large-scale loss of income and limited access to social protection quickly ushered in rising food insecurity, affecting women disproportionately.[7] The global social protection and jobs response has paid insufficient attention to these dynamics.

Countries with more comprehensive and more gender-responsive social protection and labour market institutions were generally better able to support women's economic security. For example, in countries like Brazil and South Africa, pre-existing cash transfer schemes targeted at mothers in vulnerable households could be rapidly scaled up to provide much-needed, albeit insufficient, support in the face of the pandemic.

But examples of policy expansion and innovation also emerged in contexts with less-than-ideal starting points, especially where governments consulted gender equality advocates, civil society and workers' organizations in the process. Out of 41 countries that extended social protection to informal workers, for example, at least 15 did so with special provisions for women in the informal economy. Women informal workers accounted for 63 per cent of the over 800,000 recipients of Togo's new, fully digital, cash transfer 'Novissi'. They also received higher benefits than men in recognition of their double role as income providers and family caregivers. In Malaysia, migrant domestic workers organized for the first time, attended policy consultations and won a number of new rights, including access to the Employment Injury Scheme, and the right to employer-supported social security.[8]

While some 30 countries have adopted measures geared towards enabling women to (re)enter the workforce, there has not been nearly enough policy action to address the gendered labour market impact of the pandemic. In 2021, there were still 19.7 million fewer jobs for women than before the pandemic, compared to 10.2 million fewer for men.[9]

POCKETS OF POLICY INNOVATION AMID GLARING GAPS
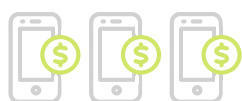
Electronically paid cash transfers reached beneficiaries on average **ONE MONTH FASTER** than manual or part-electronic programmes

41 countries extended social protection to different groups of **INFORMAL WORKERS**

30 countries launched gender-sensitive training and active **LABOUR MARKET POLICIES**

Unpaid care work

With the outbreak of the pandemic, business activities ground to an abrupt halt and public services, including schools and day-care facilities, drastically reduced their operations while unpaid care demands in families and communities skyrocketed.
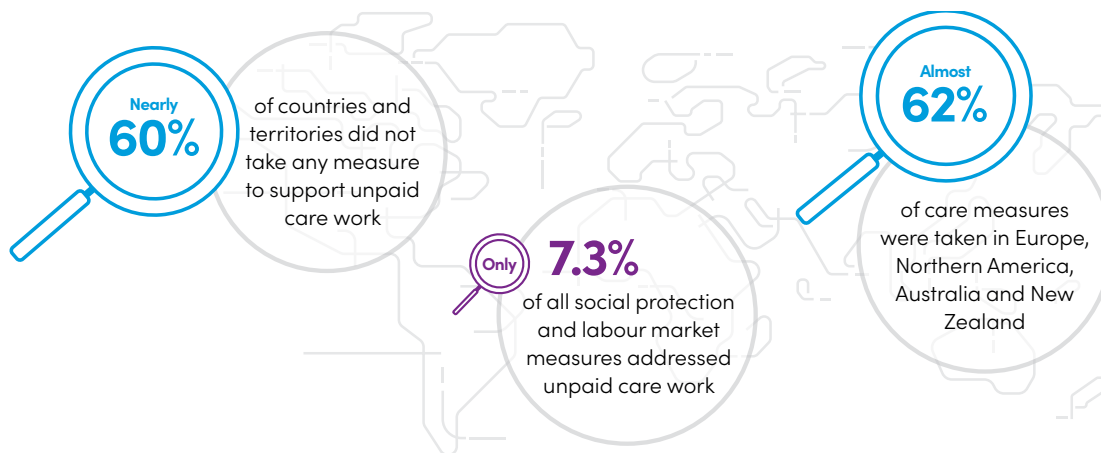
While both women and men increased their unpaid care and domestic workloads, women continued to shoulder the lion's share, with negative ripple effects on their employment, earnings, health and well-being.[10] In a context of patchy and fragile care arrangements, plagued by inequalities before the pandemic, it was hard for many countries to make up for the long-standing neglect, and most did little to respond to rising unpaid care demands.

Care measures, such as the expansion of family leaves, emergency childcare services or cash-for-care to compensate for school and day care closures, were heavily concentrated in Europe, Northern America, Australia and New Zealand,

which includes countries with more robust social protection systems and care services that could be adapted to new needs. In the case of Canada and Chile, the pandemic brought the fragility of the care economy into sharp focus, which enabled feminists to lobby successfully for emergency care measures, but also laid the foundation for a longer-term policy push towards the creation of national care systems.

While none of the other regions mounted a comparable response, all include positive examples of action, particularly where the issue had already been established on public policy agendas. For example, the Government of Cabo Verde recruited additional social workers, caregivers and volunteers to provide home-based care for older persons who lived alone and were affected by the closure of day centres that had provided care, meals and opportunities for socializing prior to the pandemic.

LIMITED RESPONSES REFLECT LONGSTANDING NEGLECT

Nearly 60% of countries and territories did not take any measure to support unpaid care work

Only 7.3% of all social protection and labour market measures addressed unpaid care work

Almost 62% of care measures were taken in Europe, Northern America, Australia and New Zealand

Women in COVID-19 task forces

As governments rushed to create governance and advisory bodies to steer their responses to the pandemic, they largely relied on pre-existing male-dominated political networks. As a result, women remained largely excluded and marginalized from leadership positions. Mirroring their global underrepresentation in national parliaments, only 24 per cent of COVID-19 task force members were women.
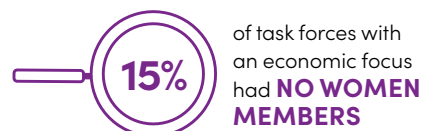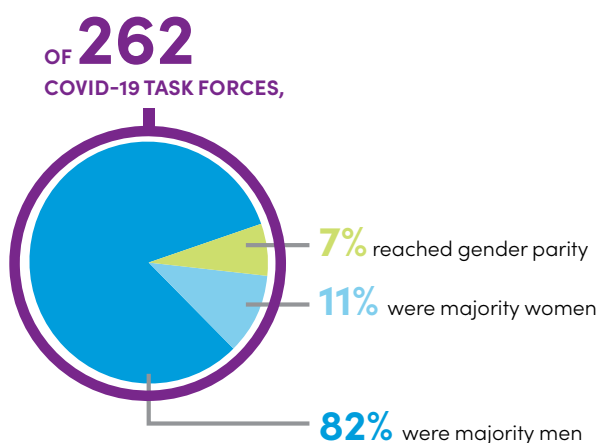
'Glass ceilings' constrained women's access to more senior and influential roles within task forces, while 'glass walls' confined them to certain positions and policy areas. For example, women were better represented among public health task forces compared to those dealing with economic policy.

Women's representation on task forces was highest in Europe, Northern America, Australia and New Zealand, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean. These regions were already ahead of others in terms of women's representation in national parliaments and public administrations.

However, there were also cases of gender-balanced task forces in countries that did not have a head-start. Bhutan, Georgia and Guatemala, for example, all have less than 20 per cent[11] women's representation in parliament, but appointed an average of 32.6, 32.5 and 71.4 per cent women, respectively, to their task forces. In these instances, strong executive commitment may have played a role in fostering more inclusive emergency governance mechanisms. This underlines that crisis response bodies do not need to recreate gender gaps and biases.

Feminist agency also mattered. In several countries, women's organizations protested against male-dominated task forces, sometimes resulting in a revision of membership structures. In Italy, protests by feminist organizations against the initially male-dominated task force led to the incorporation of five more women members. In other countries, including Lebanon, task forces were formed specifically to address the pandemic's impact on women and girls.

LEADERSHIP INEQUALITIES PERSISTED DURING THE PANDEMIC

OF **262** COVID-19 TASK FORCES,

7% reached gender parity

11% were majority women

82% were majority men

Only **24%** of task force members globally were **WOMEN**

15% of task forces with an economic focus had **NO WOMEN MEMBERS**

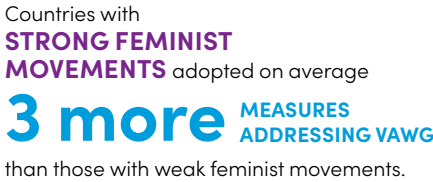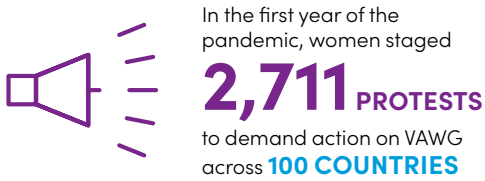# The role of democratic institutions and feminist movements

What were the factors that enabled a more gender-sensitive response to the pandemic? Countries with strong pre-existing policy architectures and administrative capacity were in a better position to rapidly scale-up support systems. This depended on fiscal capacity before and during the pandemic, putting low-income countries at a major disadvantage. But experience with previous crises – including those caused by extreme weather events or conflict – as well as political factors also mattered. Indeed, countries with powerful feminist movements, stronger democracies or higher levels of women's representation in parliament adopted an average of five more gender-sensitive measures than those without those features, controlling for GDP.

Democratic processes and institutions provide an enabling environment for the aggregation and channelling of societal demands, including by marginalized groups, and for holding decision-makers to account. A country's level of democracy is also closely associated with women's representation in public office and their presence made a clear difference during the pandemic. As government ministers, Members of Parliament, civil servants or local officials, women have placed gender issues on the agenda, spearheaded the proposal of gender-sensitive emergency measures and supported their adoption, from addressing VAWG in Uzbekistan, to supporting the rights of domestic workers in Argentina, to introducing flexible working conditions and childcare subsidies for working mothers in Jordan.

In many countries, women in formal positions of power responded to and worked closely with feminist movements and organizations. Feminist advocacy has been more vocal, interconnected and internationally active during COVID-19 compared to previous pandemics or economic crises. Without the early and forceful action of feminist movements and organizations across the globe, it is unlikely that governments would have recognized and taken measures to address the gendered ramifications of the pandemic, particularly with regards to the uptick in VAWG.

FEMINIST MOBILIZATION WAS A CRITICAL DRIVER OF GOVERNMENT ACTION

In the first year of the pandemic, women staged
2,711 **PROTESTS**
to demand action on VAWG across **100 COUNTRIES**

Countries with
STRONG FEMINIST MOVEMENTS adopted on average
3 more **MEASURES ADDRESSING VAWG**
than those with weak feminist movements.

FIVE PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE CRISIS RESPONSE AND RESILIENCE

INVEST

in gender-responsive social protection to increase resilience to shocks

STRENGTHEN

data and evidence on gender equality and women's rights

Canada's ground-breaking plan for a national childcare system is estimated to create 280,000 jobs over the next decade, enable up to 725,000 women to join the labour force and generate billions in tax revenue each year

Morocco's gender budgeting approach geared half of the country's COVID-19 spending towards gender-sensitive interventions, including explicit inclusion of women and informal workers in measures aimed at micro, small and medium enterprises

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the government developed a data-based plan to support civil society organizations running shelters for survivors of gender-based violence

In **Bogota**, Colombia, feminist organizations influenced the women's rights agenda of mayoral candidate Claudia Lopez Hernández. Once in office, the mayor spearheaded the creation of a support system for unpaid caregivers across the city

In **Italy**, protests by feminist organizations using the hashtag #DateciVoce (Give us a voice) against the initial male-dominated task force appointed in April 2020 led to the incorporation of five more women members

Togo's fully digital cash transfer programme for informal workers during the pandemic, reached 30,000 recipients within two days of its launch. By 2021, women accounted for 63% of the over 800,000 recipients

Fiji, a country with a history of handling crises caused by extreme weather events, activated its GBV Emergency Response Group to coordinate one of the world's strongest VAWG responses to the pandemic

SUPPORT

feminist movements and women's rights organizations

HARNESS

digital technologies for gender equality

BUILD

institutional capacity for effective gender mainstreaming

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A WORLD IN TURMOIL

Build institutional capacity, strengthen networks and support women's leadership

Countries that, in addition to having greater fiscal space, could rely on robust administrative and service-delivery systems, rolled out support faster and more effectively, while those with patchy systems and bureaucratic deficits had to improvise, with varying success. Women's Policy Agencies (WPAs), gender focal points or 'femocrats' are important pillars of administrative capacity and have contributed to a stronger, more inclusive crisis response. Too often, however, these actors are side-lined and underfunded within governments and state bureaucracies. Strengthening their authority, resource base and technical expertise will be critical to ensure gender-sensitive approaches to future crises.

While fiscal and administrative capacity are important during an emergency, so is the political capacity of states to channel the participation of affected groups, including women. Such participation is most effective when it is multi-sited, encompassing different branches and tiers of government, and when it has strong ties with women's rights advocates in civil society. Even in countries where fiscal and administrative capacities are limited, democratic institutions and participatory processes were used to build more inclusive emergency responses by involving affected groups in policy design and delivery.

In a global context of democratic erosion, which often goes hand-in-hand with pushback against gender equality, it has never been more critical for governments and parliaments to safeguard and strengthen processes that reconnect power-holders with the constituencies that they are meant to serve.

Invest in gender-responsive social protection and public services to increase resilience to future shocks

Governments were better able to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on women and girls where they could rely on pre-existing infrastructure, whether that was VAWG services or gender-responsive social protection.

Without significant efforts to strengthen this infrastructure now, a gender-just recovery will remain elusive, and most countries will remain ill-prepared for the next big shock. This will require a significant injection of fiscal resources, and a public investment-led recovery strategy.[12] In light of the pandemic's lasting negative effects on women's economic security, and the urgent need to transition economies to environmental sustainability, it is essential that these investments create jobs in green and labour-intensive

sectors and that women get a fair share of these opportunities.

Governments must make good on their promises to address the chronic underresourcing of VAWG services and the organizations that provide them. Greater investments in universal, gender-responsive social protection systems could improve preparedness and support recovery by boosting demand and incomes.[13]

Several countries have recognized this potential and taken steps in the right direction: from renewed momentum on VAWG laws and policies; to gender-responsive social protection innovations; to large-scale investments in the care economy. But the threat of austerity suffocating progress is real, particularly in the Global South. Global policies that enlarge fiscal space and strengthen multilateral cooperation are critical.

Support feminist movements and organizations in their agenda-setting, accountability and service-delivery roles

While the pandemic has reinforced the relevance of the state, it has also shown that it needs to be counter-balanced by a strong civil society. Feminist movements and women's civil society organizations were key for demanding government action, and monitoring and supporting the effective delivery of social protection and public services. In doing so, they have enhanced the effectiveness of government response and recovery efforts in many contexts.

The strength of feminist movements, their capacity to respond to crises and resist rollbacks requires space to organize and develop alternatives, which calls for funding that is long-term, flexible and without political strings attached, so that feminists can set their own agendas for change. In several

countries, VAWG advocacy efforts were successful because feminist movements had already made progress on shifting social norms that condone VAWG, established it as an area for government intervention and built networks with policy insiders.

At the grass-roots level, women's organizations with diverse membership and strong organizational capacity were in a better position to swiftly scale up support for their communities. With a global food crisis looming and a stable climate unravelling, supporting women's organizations' work as first responders will be ever more urgent. It is critical that states do not shift full responsibility for service delivery onto women's organizations, exploiting their unpaid or underpaid labour in the process.

Strengthen production and use of data and evidence on gender equality during crises

Robust, representative and accessible gender data are a critical tool for prompting action, monitoring progress and holding decision-makers accountable for integrating gender into crisis response and recovery. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, efforts to collect, analyse and disseminate real-time data – both quantitative and qualitative – were driven by the purposeful action of gender equality advocates across institutional spaces.[14]

The pandemic triggered a rise in remote data collection and the use of non-traditional data sources, including by UN Women and partners to conduct rapid gender assessments in over 75 countries, which produced nationally representative data on unpaid care and domestic work and VAWG, among others.

Efforts to track the rapidly evolving policy response by governments were another data innovation.

By May 2020, however, not one of the global policy trackers included a gender perspective. The UNDP-UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker, on which this report is based, was developed to fill this gap.

There is much more to learn from the COVID-19 response, with much of the evidence on implementation and impact still emerging. Several promising avenues for future research include: a focus on the quality of responses and the extent to which their design advances gender equality; monitoring their implementation and impact, including on different groups of women and girls; analysis of subnational dynamics, such as the role of local governments and grass-roots organizations; additional research on how to strengthen state capacity to deliver on gender equality in crisis response; and more in-depth research on the enablers of and pathways to gender responsiveness.

Harness digital technologies for gender equality during crisis response and recovery

COVID-19 has accelerated ongoing digital transformations, which hold great potential for the empowerment of women and girls – as social protection beneficiaries, entrepreneurs and activists. The use of digital tools and technologies in registration, enrolment and payment processes allowed countries to expand coverage and speed up delivery of gender-sensitive social protection measures; and more than 100 countries used digital tools to adapt support services for survivors of violence.

Digital tools have also been a significant enabler of collective action. While feminist activism has long been operating online,[15] amid national lockdowns, digital feminist activism intensified. Technology was also an effective tool to tackle misinformation, gather data on needs of local communities, and advocate for policy changes.

To harness the potential and minimize the risks of digital tools, it is critical to close persistent gender gaps in access to digital and financial services, which are particularly wide in low-income countries, and among the most marginalized women. With rising concerns about cyberviolence against women and girls,[16] greater regulation is also needed to protect human rights, enable collective action and support women's full participation in public life.

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare and exacerbated the multiple systemic inequalities that blight the lives of women and girls. The time to lay the foundations for gender-just recovery and future crisis preparedness is now. While action at national and local levels will be critical, global institutions and processes also need to be transformed to ensure greater solidarity, power-sharing and democracy. The fate of countries is interdependent, but this interdependence is asymmetric, with poorer countries facing structural subordination. Creating a socially just and sustainable future must therefore be a common goal with differentiated responsibilities. At a time when COVID-19 has derailed progress on gender equality, greater multilateral cooperation and solidarity will be a prerequisite for getting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development back on track.

Endnotes

1   WHO (World Health Organization). 2022. Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard. Accessed 28 April 2022.

2   UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development). 2022. *Trade and Development Report Update: Tapering in a Time of Conflict*. Geneva: UNCTAD.

3   UNCTAD. 2021. *Trade and Development Report 2021: From Recovery to Resilience – The Development Dimension*. Geneva: UNCTAD.

4   Given the different data-collection and analysis processes used for identifying VAWG measures, on the one hand, and women's economic security and unpaid care measures, on the other, the three areas are not strictly comparable. While women's economic security and unpaid care measures have been located within a broader universe of social protection, labour market, fiscal and economic measures, VAWG measures have no such point of reference.

5   UN Women. 2021. *Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Collecting Violence against Women During COVID-19*. New York: UN Women.

6   ILO (International Labour Organization). 2022. *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2022* (Annex C1) Geneva: ILO.

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8   Ip, F. 2021. "Malaysia: AMMPO and PERTIMIG Welcomes Government's Move to Cover Some Social Security of Domestic Workers." International Domestic Workers Federation. 3 May; Pinkcollar Employment Agency. 2022. "Compulsory SOCSO Coverage for Domestic Workers (2022)." 9 February.

9   ILO. 2022. *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2022*. (Annex C1) Geneva: ILO.

10   UN Women. 2022. "More than 2 million moms left the labour force in 2020 according to new global estimates." UN Women Data Hub. 21 February.

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14   Staab, S. and Tabbush, C. 2022. "Following a moving target on a global scale: Gender data collection during COVID-19." *Global Social Policy* 22 (1), pp. 184–189.

15   UN Women. Undated. "Rapid Gender Assessments on the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19." UN Women Data Hub.

16   Friedman, E. 2016. *Interpreting the Internet: Feminist and Queer Counterpublics in Latin America*. Oakland: University of California Press; IPU (Inter-Parliamentary Union). 2021. *Women in parliament in 2020: The year in review*. Geneva: IPU; Denkovski, D., N. Bernarding and K. Lunz. 2021. *Power Over Rights: Understanding and Countering Anti-Gender Movements*. Vol. 1. Berlin: Center for Feminist Foreign Policy.

The overlapping impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, accelerating climate disasters and geopolitical conflict are a threat to gender equality and women's rights across the globe. This report from UN Women and UNDP shows what governments can do now to prevent further rollbacks and recover lost ground, while enhancing resilience and preparedness for future shocks.

Drawing on a unique global dataset of close to 5,000 measures adopted by 226 countries and territories in response to COVID-19, the report finds that overall, government responses paid insufficient attention to gender dynamics. At the same time, instances of innovation and learning hold important lessons for gender-responsive policymaking in times of crisis.

For the first time, the report provides analysis on the factors that led to a strong gender response, generating key lessons for governments. The policy implications are clear: governments must invest in gender-responsive social protection and public services now to increase resilience to future shocks; institutional capacity for gender equality, feminist networks and women's leadership must be strengthened for effective gender mainstreaming; feminist movements and women's rights organizations require greater support to play their agenda-setting, accountability and service-delivery roles; data and evidence on gender equality and women's rights must be enhanced and digital technologies harnessed for promoting gender equality during crisis response, recovery and transformation.