

COVID-19 and the Impact on Gender Equality

Across the world, the gendered impacts of COVID-19 are mounting, threatening to erase advances made to gender equality and women's and girls' rights over the past three decades. It is paramount stakeholders, including business, adopt gender-sensitive and gender-responsive measures to understand how gender inequality impacts women, mitigate any unintended negative consequences of their activities, and, in turn, provide the tools and opportunities necessary for women's economic inclusion and empowerment.

Numerous high-level international agreements, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, explicitly identify gender equality and, more specifically, women's empowerment as critical components to achieving peace and development. Despite an abundance of research that demonstrates these linkages, gender-based constraints abound restricting women's agency. The outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has underscored and, in many cases, intensified the devastating effects of discriminatory structures and toxic social norms that overwhelmingly impact women and girls. In a recent policy brief, United Nations Secretary-General underlined the gendered impacts of COVID-19. António Guterres noted, "Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex." In light of the twentieth anniversary of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, all stakeholders, including business, should pursue both immediate and long-term gender-responsive recovery measures.

Increasingly, companies are committing in-kind and financial contributions to mitigate the economic fallout from COVID-19. While the immediate relief companies have offered is welcome, the business community can significantly impact the workplace, marketplace, and communities beyond social investments, and in turn, contribute to greater gender equality. The following list of inclusive policies can assist in women's economic and livelihood security, particularly during extreme adversity such as the COVID-19 pandemic:

- safe working environment;
- fair wage standards;
- salary transparency;
- pay parity;
- flexible working hours;
- remote work options;
- work-life balance schemes;
- childcare facilities;
- paid parental leave for parents;
- wellbeing and parenting schemes;
- continuing education and;
- transportation services.

There is no more critical time, than the COVID-19 pandemic for companies to integrate diversity and inclusion into operations. Business efforts need to be backed by policy-level measures to eradicate structural factors that overwhelmingly impact women and girls negatively. An economic system, sustained by women who are unpaid and underpaid for their

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work and capabilities, is not only unjust; it constrains women's agency, hinders economic growth and limits prospects for sustainable peace from taking root. The devastating effects of COVID-19 have reminded the international community of the value and importance of gender-sensitive collective action that includes business alongside government in national settings.