

A Joint Statement: Gender, Faith and COVID-19

0.0. Introduction

As religious actors and networks of faith-based organizations, we are called to work together for gender equality and justice, amid global changes, rising nationalism, and conflict. We are living in changing global, regional, and national environments. As COVID-19 spreads around our world, countries, communities and individuals face increasing challenges. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many faith actors are at the forefront of the design, delivery, and implementation of a gender sensitive and holistic response based on accurate information. While also practicing social distancing, and adhering to health ministry guidelines. This urgent time calls for responsive action based on love, dignity and justice.

The COVID-19 crisis does not operate in a vacuum and, as a result, COVID-19 increases pre-existing inequalities. Women and girls are experiencing intersecting injustices in political, social and economic spheres.¹ Faith in Beijing is a collective of religious actors and networks, who are calling upon governments, faith based actors and civil society, for strong responses to COVID-19 that put gender justice at the centre.

1.0. Gendered dimensions of COVID-19

Governments worldwide have struggled to adequately respond to the crisis. This is a result of decisions made by powerful leaders, which includes decades of underfunding public health services, and the multilateral health system, including the World Health Organization (WHO). For many decades, the WHO has consistently presented robust evidence about the social determinants of health, the need for health to be rooted in all policies, and observed that health cannot be separated from other policy areas. The COVID-19 pandemic shows that strong responses require intersectional approaches, which include protecting women's rights and gender equality.

Looking at COVID-19 from an intersectional gendered lens, we can see that the various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate one another. The big picture is much more complex than is often portrayed by governments. Pre-existing vulnerabilities are exacerbated during a crisis, since social and protective networks are disrupted. Under lockdown policies, many women are forced to stay at homes where they are not safe or secure. They are forced to live

¹ For more information, see: *UN (2020) Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women*, <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5029> [last accessed 15/04/2020]

with abusive partners or parents, while services to survivors of gender-based violence are harder to access.² As the pandemic unfolds, we have witnessed an increase in intimate partner violence and other forms of domestic violence. In some communities around the world, violence against women during the pandemic has been by the security agencies enforcing the lockdown, sometimes using undue force. The COVID-19 response must therefore include strategies to address and prevent Sexual and Gender Based Violence. This work must be conducted in a holistic way, with a multi-sectoral approach so that people's mental, social and physical needs are addressed. By integrating psychosocial aspects in the approach, the wellbeing, safety and hope among survivors and communities can be strengthened.

As gender injustice persists in our world, the impacts of COVID-19 will be hardest felt by women and girls. Worldwide, many people who are enrolled in health care and the related care economy are women. Occupying positions on the frontline makes women more susceptible to the risk of infection. Many people will lose their livelihoods, as already experienced worldwide with the global lockdown. This impacts the service industry and informal sector, where many women work. The closure of schools will impact girls' education now and in the long-term, with an increase risk for child marriage and child labour.³

This becomes more acute when we look at the different levels of vulnerability women might be exposed to, such as age, race, ethnicity, class, disability and immigrant status. Since health care systems are immensely pressured during COVID-19, it is important that governments worldwide continue to provide sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services. These services are essential and lifesaving, especially for women and girls, and are now more crucial with heightened risks for women and girls.

2.0. Faith and Gender Sensitive Responses

Once more we see that religious actors and faith communities can play an important role in the time of an unprecedented crisis. Faith actors are deeply rooted in the communities they serve and as such they are often the first responders. In the face of the COVID 19 pandemic, local faith institutions, religious leaders and other faith-based organizations are responding to the needs of their communities as humanitarian actors as well as leveraging their moral authority to share positive health messaging and guidance, as informed by government health ministries.

Around the globe, millions of people have been placed under lockdown to reduce transmission of the virus and halt rates of infection and death. Isolation associated with lockdowns and

² Many women are being forced to 'lockdown' at home with their abusers at the same time that services to support survivors are being disrupted or made inaccessible. For more information, see: UN Women (2020) *COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls*: <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5006> [last accessed 15/04/20]

³ Studies from Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone show that girls' education was negatively affected by the Ebola epidemic. After the outbreak, less girls returned to school. For more information, see Malala Fund (2020) *Girls education and COVID-19 – what past shocks can teach us about mitigating the impact of pandemics*, <https://malala.org/newsroom/archive/malala-fund-releases-report-girls-education-covid-19> [last accessed 15/04/20]

quarantines will have an impact on the communities that we work in and to which we belong. Faith communities are social by nature. Religious institutions and religious practices are impacted, as ceremonies that usually bring many of us together are being curtailed. Easter was, and Ramadan will be, marked differently this year, yet continue to be opportunities to give and receive, forgive, forbear and exercise patience.

Faith communities have a strong base from which to promote social distancing (to reduce transmission of the virus causing COVID-19), while also practicing solidarity. Service to those most oppressed must continue, albeit in new ways. Many religious leaders hold significant power and trust, sometimes more than the government. Thus, religious institutions can play a vital role in distributing accurate key public health information to their communities. As well as promoting messages of gender justice, challenging stigma and harmful gender norms.

Inter-faith and inter-religious dialogue and collaboration is crucial at these times. Majority religions, with stronger relationships and trust among authorities and state officials, can collaborate with minority religions, who are extra vulnerable in many contexts. Moreover, faith actors and religious institutions with more resources and capacity to respond to this crisis can share knowledge, resources and best practices where possible with other religious communities, traditional leaders and women's rights organisations. Therefore, faith actors continue to be critical partners in addressing this crisis and in the work to come.

3.0. Post COVID-19: A Vision of Gender Justice in Our World

We, as religious actors and faith-based networks, are committed to ensuring that gender justice and equality becomes a reality around the world. We believe that Agenda 2030 is critical to ensuring that 'No One is Left Behind', and that gender equality is about equal rights for all.

As business as usual is paused, we have the opportunity to reflect upon the brokenness in our world and our economic system. In these spaces, we can begin to imagine a world rooted in equality and justice for all. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how globally interconnected we are and how gender injustice reveals itself at an individual and a collective level.

During this crisis, our focus will be on how best we can work together to support religious leaders and faith communities to effectively respond to increasingly challenging circumstances. In particular, our work for gender justice remains important, to ensure a just and sustainable future for all. We will continue to work within and between our faith communities to shape a world that is sustainable and where the human rights of all are respected.

Our commitment to human rights is not an arbitrary cultural or ideological preference; it is rooted in religious convictions. There can be no justice where God-given human rights are violated or where duty bearers fail to discharge their responsibilities. In this vision, we value the work of caring and nurturing within our communities. Let us seek to truly learn from those who already hold the knowledge and wisdom of alternative systems. Let us understand that one knowledge alone will never be complete. Only by truly engaging with one another from a place of humility

and vulnerability, with a willingness to defamiliarize ourselves with current norms that we might see the radical shift towards a justice-centred world. This is necessary for true gender equality, as well as human and planetary flourishing.

4.0. Recommendations to Governments, Faith Based Actors and Civil Society

In the weeks, months, years and decades ahead, we will continue to work together to advocate to our governments, and within our communities, for an acceleration of action to achieve Agenda 2030. In light of this commitment, we submit the following recommendations in the midst of COVID-19 response and beyond.

A Collective Call to Governments

- 1.** We advocate that all responses involve faith actors, and ensure coordination and meaningful partnerships between faith, traditional and secular actors. Faith actors are key in reaching communities both with essential information, providing service to vulnerable groups and promoting behaviour change and challenging harmful norms, stereotypes and stigma.
- 2.** We advocate for the adoption of gender just policies and funding of COVID-19 response plans that holistically address the pandemic, including the secondary impacts on education, health, economy and livelihoods.
- 3.** We recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic response requires resource mobilisation, and we urge our governments to continue to fund and resource their commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.
- 4.** The 'domestic' workforce, where women make up 70%, are more likely to be part of the frontline response. We advocate to our governments for coordinated responses that are sensitive to the needs of women and girls, where unpaid caregivers and community health workers are provided with adequate training, equipment, and livelihood support to respond effectively and keep themselves and their families safe.
- 5.** We advocate for a holistic development agenda that addresses intersectional injustices, including universal health coverage and gender just health systems, equality in education, economic empowerment and freedom from exploitation, violence and discrimination. Governments must integrate a gender assessment to understand the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls, including economic impact, and how to address it effectively. Governments must plan and resource its response for the long term as the impacts will continue long after we have tackled the virus.
- 6.** We advocate for governments, faith leaders and civil society to collaborate in designating safe spaces (physical and online) for women where they can report abuse without alerting perpetrators, e.g. in pharmacies or via digital platforms.

A Collective Call to Fellow Faith-Based Actors and Civil Society

7. We advocate that political, religious and community leaders speak out against Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, and ensure that survivor-centred services for women are well resourced and functioning. Awareness campaigns should be continued, and tactics that include targeting men and boys at home should be integrated.
8. We encourage faith communities to support social solidarity through whatever means are available, and for those with additional resources to support connection and community among those most at-risk.
9. Faith-based actors are already important providers of education and psycho-social support. We advocate during this time, for practices to be adapted and resourced to ensure this work continues.
10. We advocate to faith-actors to promote values of love, dignity and justice in their work to tackle this pandemic. It is vital that a non-discriminatory approach is exercised in all aspects of the COVID-19 response.
11. We advocate that political and religious leaders adopt communication channels that reach people marginalized in our communities, particularly women and girls. Women and girls may have restricted access to information in times of crises, therefore, limited access to food distribution systems, health care or accessibility to protection services.

We will not remain silent when gender inequalities are exacerbated as a result of this crisis.

