This document presents policy and programme opportunities for country offices, regional offices and headquarters to support women’s political participation and leadership during the COVID-19 crisis. The background however relates to East and Southern Africa Regional (ESAR) context.
1. BACKGROUND

Over the years, the East and Southern Africa region has been prone to shocks of conflict, natural disasters and climate change heavily impacting populations most at risk. Since its outbreak on 31 December 2019, Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) has infected hundreds of thousands of people across the world having devastated effects on individuals and communities. The Director General of the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. Women comprises majority of health care workers, especially in the primary health care service where much of outbreaks are addressed. According to International Labor Organization (ILO), women worldwide perform around 76.2% percent of total hours than men. During the COVID-19 response, schools have been closed and most workers advised to work from home. In addition to their jobs, the burden of caring for the whole families including for the sick is primarily on women. According to World Health Organization (WHO), women constitute 70 percent of health social care (e.g. nurses, midwives, cleaners, laundry workers etc.)\(^1\) and this might be high in developing countries where majority of social work and primary health service is handled by women. This calls for targeted interventions that protect women from infection and support and build women’s resilience to fight the pandemic at all levels. As such, women must be engaged in the design and execution as primary respondents, both in public health sector and unpaid care givers in the communities, whilst supporting the reconstruction of longer-term solutions.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an additional threat to the right to life and health as it continuously depicts the vulnerability of systems/structures whilst testing the resilience of society. Against this landscape, we are further challenged to tackle the health as well as the socio-economic impact of this pandemic.

Disease outbreaks affect women, men, boys and girls differently and each context is different whereby needs and capabilities to prevent and respond will vary. However, it is vital to study the gender and intersectional impacts of the COVID-19 crisis and draw lessons from previous public health emergencies such as Ebola for better defined solutions. Such crisis also exacerbates various forms of inequalities placing women and girls and other vulnerable populations at greater risk of gender-based violence as well as intimate partner violence resulting in major physical and psycho-social harm.

As UN Women, we need to drive an evidence-based advocacy whereby the COVID-19 crisis is not only analyzed from a health pandemic perspective but also incorporating the underlying gender dimensions of the socio-economic impact when focusing on prevention, protection and response measures. This also gives us an opportunity to redress long standing inequalities in the lives of women and girls through the agitation of radical and robust interventions. The strengths of global solidarity shall overcome the plight of the pandemic.

This guidance note is therefore proposing gender responsive and strategic interventions for multi and country offices in the areas of women’s participation in leadership and governance.

---

I. CONDUCT GLOBAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL OUTREACH, ADVOCACY & EXPERIENCE SHARING

Convene and facilitate online discussions to share information, challenges and experiences on COVID-19 response and lessons learned (including from a gender perspective) between different stakeholders, including women in political decision-making (e.g. mayors, MPs, local councilors) and/or the civil society (CSOs) and women constituents. Collate different experiences and good practices.

• GLOBAL LEVEL:
  Leverage existing global networks and partners:
  • Convene webinars or remote discussions to facilitate exchanges between different groups on women's political leadership and how decision-making forums are responding to COVID-19, including facilitating an e-discussion and live Twitter Chat on gendered impacts of COVID-19 on iKNOW Politics.
  • Convene webinars or remote discussions targeting multi and country offices (M/COs) and partners on relevant and topical issues, including how parliaments and/or local governments from around the world are responding to COVID-19.

• REGIONAL LEVEL:
  Convene discussions in partnership with regional organizations bringing together different stakeholders, e.g. the Ibero-American Union of Municipal Leaders (UIM) or UN Regional Commissions (UNECA, ECOWAS; ESCWA), Parlatino, African Women Leaders Network (AWLN); the African Union, and develop joint communication and advocacy tools on women’s leader’s role and contribution to the response (e.g. Latin American Task Force on Women’s Leadership).

• COUNTRY LEVEL:
  • M/COs may convene remote national dialogues bringing together decision-makers and constituents/stakeholders, e.g. women in local councils, parliaments, CSOs, constituents through virtual town halls (e.g. the Colombia CO, jointly with the network of women political leaders, will to identify specific needs for support through surveys).
  • M/COs may assess/promote women’s participation in high level task forces and provide data on representation of women ministers and other leaders in those groups.
  • M/COs may produce communication tools to increase the visibility of women legislators and leaders in responding to COVID-19 both at the national and the local level.
II. SUPPORT DECISION-MAKERS ON GENDER-SENSITIVE COVID-19 RESPONSES WITH KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTS

• Produce a primer outlining key issues for parliaments to consider when working on gender-sensitive COVID-19 responses including a simple list of concrete actions and messages.

• Develop corporate key messages on Women’s Political Participation & Leadership in COVID-19 response.

• Incorporate UN Women’s global and regional messaging into pledges and statements by political institutions (e.g. recent Parlatino Declaration).

• Incorporate key messages in Leadership and Governance’s COVID-19 Policy Brief and Programme Package; and all UN Women corporate and strategic positioning.

• Disseminate knowledge products to help mobilize political women leaders, parliaments or local governments to promote and commit to gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19 through initiatives and/or pledges (e.g., the Beijing+25/Generation Equality, Action Coalitions, Women Political leadership and African Women Leadership Network.

• Amplify Women’s Voices in COVID-19 Response Through Social Media Initiatives.

• Through global media monitoring, track statements by women Heads of State and Government, women leaders quoted, women’s representation in public appearances, cabinet teams communicating and working on COVID-19 response (e.g. undertaken weekly by Women Political participation team and shared widely).

• Profile women Heads of State and/or Ministers/ mayors (where possible) and COVID-19 response (e.g. on UN Women social media platforms and/or iKNOW Politics).

• Facilitate regular, virtual knowledge exchanges between colleagues in UN Women’s Community of Practice on women’s political participation (e.g. via Zoom meetings, Sharepoint, Communities of Practice email listserv) to maintain connections between staff in different regions, share innovations and document good practices and lessons learned resulting from COVID-19 disruptions, collaborate on new initiatives, and strengthen UN Women’s capacity to respond to the needs of partners through programmes and partnerships.

• Support social media campaigns led by women political leaders with key messaging and dissemination of existing legislation and policies and available resources for women and their families during confinement on, e.g. self-care, prevention of and attention to violence against women during the crisis (e.g. a recent campaign in El Salvador jointly implemented by the Parliamentary Women Caucus and the National Association of Female Political Leaders of the Local Level, ANDRYSAS).
III. PROVIDE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE ON GENDER-SENSITIVE COVID-19 RESPONSES

• HQ and Regional Policy advice and technical assistance is available to M/COs and partners, upon demand, including on reprogramming or adapting ongoing programmes to support women's political participation. Please reach out to the HQ team or your respective Regional Advisor for support.

• Provide on demand technical support to countries eligible for the Multi Partner Trust Fund window on women's leadership in COVID-19 response as part of the country team proposal.

• Provide support to all UN Women corporate processes on COVID-19 gender response and political participation as needed.

• At country level, technical support to be made available to women elected at all levels on gender analysis of executive decrees and bills related to state emergencies (e.g. Colombia CO is collecting decrees, laws and public statements to review and inform women political leaders' response).

• Technical experts are available to support decision-making bodies with gender-responsive budgeting for economic relief/aid packages as part of COVID-19 prevention and response as needed (e.g. Colombia CO to tailor UN Women's Gender Responsive Budgeting training curriculum for COVID-19 response and public procurement).

• Virtual trainings made available to decision makers on gender-sensitive COVID-19 response (e.g. Argentina at Cabinet level and Cameroon with MPs and mayors).

• M/COs and regional offices to help compile examples of good and innovative practices of gender responsive COVID-19 responses and action to promote and protect women's political participation to be shared with other regions.

IV. COORDINATION ON ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE IN COVID-19 RESPONSE AND PROGRAMMES

• HQ to co-convene UN partners to ensure gender dimensions are included on corporate messaging and country re/programming on electoral assistance.

• Provide gender analysis on UN partner's assessments of Covid-19 impact on electoral operations and formulation and impact on electoral support activities in the Covid-19 context (on demand).

• M/COs to help assess and address political repercussions by encouraging dialogue and consensus building among electoral stakeholders around elections including with CSOs and women's organisations.

• When elections take place, in coordination with UNDP, United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and other UN Agencies involved in, M/CO teams to ensure compliance with protocols from national authorities charged with the health/security/logistics when providing support to electoral stakeholders including:

  • Minimize spread of COVID-19 during through strict protocols and by encouraging the adoption of election-specific sanitary and health regulation. For example, direct operational costs to include procurement of masks and hand sanitizers to ensure safety of staff and partners (e.g. in Cameroon and to be replicated in other countries supported); and ensure social distancing measures applied during meetings and/or capacity building activities (e.g. BRIDGE training held in CAR).

  • Enhance advocacy and communication to remote areas and underrepresented groups of women (e.g. community radio outreach in Cameroon; CSO’s platforms and WhatsApp groups in Mexico and Nigeria; and media training in Brazil).

  • Strengthen data gathering and analysis and enhance early response through convening multi-stakeholder dialogues and coordination platforms (e.g. Cameroon platforms in 10 regions).
• When elections are postponed:

• Ensure close coordination with UN partners on the ground to ensure UN Women programme activities are aligned with new timelines.

• Provide gender analysis on UN assessments of the impact of COVID-19 to ensure women's participation and that UN recommendations aim to enhance inclusion.

• Support the adaption of existing materials, or the development of alternative communication plans and information materials, as needed, especially if virtual tools may be required (e.g. Bolivia in partnership with ACOBOL will adapt training tools for virtual trainers of trainers (ToTs) in preparation of candidate trainings; and Mexico Country Office is considering virtual training materials for aspirants).

• Provide technical support on gender mainstreaming in the development and implementation of conflict/violence prevention and mitigation mechanisms in electoral projects (e.g. Mexico CO where State elections might be postponed, the Country Office will enhance technical support to State governments to implement the existing protocol on violence against women in politics).

• Technical support available to country offices to develop Peace Building Fund project proposals for 2021 funding window, to ensure specific attention is given to prevent and mitigate violence against women in elections.
This guidance note also recommends the use of the following checklists developed and approved by UN Women HQ at the global level:

**CHECKLIST PART 1: PARLIAMENTARY SCRUTINY**

**NEW, SPECIALIZED COVID-19 GOVERNMENT GROUPS/COMMISSIONS/TASKFORCES**

- Where a government has established a **specialized political COVID-19 group** (over and above any other government committees/cabinets who may also be working on the pandemic):
  - How many women and men are members?
  - Is the Minister for Women a member of the COVID-19 group?

- Where a government has **established a specialized expert or expert and political COVID-19 group**:
  - How many women and men are members?
  - Is the Minister for Women, or equivalent line Minister a Member?
  - How many gender experts are members?

**COVID-19 EMERGENCY LEGISLATION, RELIEF PACKAGES, AND EMERGENCY BUDGETS**

- What policy areas are prioritized in emergency (i) legislation; (ii) relief packages; and (iii) budgets?

- Have emergency (i) legislation; (ii) relief packages; and (iii) budgets:
  - Been developed on the basis of SDD and gender analysis?
  - Included the involvement of government or external gender experts?
  - Included a gender impact assessment (designed by gender experts)?
  - Specifically responded to **known gender policy implications** such as:
    - Women’s over-representation among COVID-19 frontline workers, such as nurses, paramedics, cleaners, (super) market sellers, teachers, and childcare workers?
    - Women’s greater economic insecurity and precarious employment, pre-COVID-19?
    - Women’s existing unpaid care and other domestic labour?
    - Increased likelihood of domestic and gender-based violence as a consequence of movement restrictions?
    - Likely restrictions on women’s reproductive rights including limited access to abortion advice and services, and availability of maternity services?
    - The impact of motherhood and caring on women’s paid employment patterns?
    - Women’s reliance, in developing countries, on foreign aid and humanitarian assistance, including the support of international and local non-government organisations?

- Are there measures in emergency (i) legislation; (ii) relief packages; and (iii) budgets that are for **women only**?
GOVERNMENT COVID-19 COMMUNICATIONS

• Which politicians and experts participate in the communication of government COVID-19 policies, programmes and laws to the public?
  
  • Who ‘fronts’ the official briefings to the media?
  
  • Who speaks for the government on the key television and radio programmes?
  
  • Are there sex differences in the participation rates of (i) politicians and (ii) experts?

PARLIAMENTARY ORGANISATION AND LEADERSHIP

• Which parliamentary bodies and parliamentary leaders are responsible for taking the lead on holding the government’s gender sensitive actions in response to COVID-19?
  
  • What are the arrangements for coordinating their actions?
  
  • What are the arrangements for communicating their actions and effects to elected Members, parliamentary staff, and the media?
  
  • Who speaks for the opposition on the key television and radio programmes?
  
  • Do the relevant parliamentary bodies and leaders have access to comprehensive, SDD?
  
  • Do they have sufficient formal powers and resources to undertake their scrutinizing functions?
  
  • Does the parliament have sufficient in-house gender expertise, across all policy areas? If not, how will it recruit and fund additional gender expertise?

CHECKLIST PART 2: PARLIAMENTARY BUSINESS

WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY

• Have consultations been held with all Members, MPs staff and parliamentary staff to identify key concerns relating to COVID-19 and parliament as a workplace?
  
  • How have the specific needs of women and parents been accommodated?
  
  • Given the increased likelihood of interacting with individuals infected with the virus, have all MPs been swab tested?
  
  • Have all MPs’ staff and parliamentary staff who work in close proximity with Members been swab tested?
  
  • Has a ‘two metre’ distance ‘test’ been enforced across parliaments: the Chamber; voting spaces; committee rooms; cafes and bars; kitchens; and other backroom operations?
  
  • Have (additional) mental and physical support helplines and services been provided for Members, parliamentary staff, and MPs’ staff?

VIRTUAL/DIGITAL PARTICIPATION

• Have all digital initiatives employed to allow parliaments to convene during the pandemic e.g. through video conferencing and remote voting, been subjected to a gender equality impact assessment?
  
  • Do women and men MPs and appropriate parliamentary staff have equitable and effective digital provision (hardware and software) in their homes? If not, additional funds should be provided.
  
  • Do women and men MPs and appropriate parliamentary staff have equitable and effective proficiency in using digital equipment? If not, additional training should be provided.

  • How has the parliament accommodated women MPs and parliamentary staff’s disproportionate caring responsibilities in their new ways of working?
• Has the parliament established mechanisms by which to monitor and review digital participation by women and men MPs?

• Has the parliament established mechanisms by which to monitor and review parliamentary staff ability to work under the digital parliamentary regime?

• Has parliament provided additional financial support for MPs and parliamentary staff with caring needs?

• Has parliament reimbursed any additional commuting costs for those MPs and parliamentary staff who have to attend the parliamentary estate (including taxis where necessary, and taking security concerns into account)?

DEBATES, BEHAVIOUR AND LANGUAGE

• Have parliamentary leaders restated the importance of parliamentary codes of conduct, stressed their applicability to the highest level (to reflect the heightened times in which MPs, MPs’ staff and parliamentary staff are working), and specifically noted that unparliamentary behaviour includes sexual harassment, bullying and violence against women?

• How many women MPs are attending ‘face to face’ parliamentary sittings during the pandemic?

  • Has the use of, and criteria for, quorums been reviewed?

  • Has the use of proxies – for voting and for other activities e.g. committees – been reviewed?

  • Are new or revised Standing Orders (SO) introduced re: quorums and proxies gender-balanced (or at least reflect the proportion of women in the parliament)?

• How often are women MPs speaking in debates, raising points of order, moving motions, introducing bills, asking questions, moving legislative amendments?

• Should SO and other rules that require MPs to act ‘in person’ be reviewed, e.g. to table amendments, submit questions?

• What criteria are being used to allocate speaking opportunities/times on COVID-19 debates?

• Should SO be amended or suspended to introduce gender sensitive rules around speaking opportunities overall?

• Is Parliament monitoring the participation of MPs in debates and publishing SDD on MPs’ participation?

• Are gender roles and responsibilities inadvertently reinforced in any ‘crisis’ parliamentary arrangements? In particular: are only non-carers required to attend sittings; how is maternity provision impacted by ‘virtual’ parliaments; are work-life balance efforts focused only on women?

  • Has there been a review of existing codes of conduct and ethics for MPs and staff? Is there a need to develop additional codes that highlight gender sensitive behaviour and language?

PROGRAMMED LEGISLATION

• What legislation was programmed or expected over the next six to 12 months?

  • Were there measures that were women only, an equalities issue, or would be considered to disproportionately impact on women?

  • What are the gendered implications of any potential delays in the passage of this legislation?

  • What are the priorities to be addressed?

  • What parliamentary measures can be taken to ensure that this legislation is not ‘lost’ or ‘forgotten’?
PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES

GENDER SENSITIVE COVID-19 INQUIRIES

• Do SO, or any other parliamentary rules, need to be reviewed (or ‘suspended’) to ensure all parliamentary committees can immediately initiate/undertake COVID-19 related inquires?

• Do SO or any other parliamentary rules need to be reviewed (or ‘suspended’) to ensure all parliamentary committees can immediately adopt a gender sensitive approach when they undertake COVID-19 related inquires?

• Do committee resources need to be increased – with additional personnel including gender experts, and other material resources – to enable committees to adopt a gender sensitive approach to their COVID-19 related inquires?

GENDER SENSITIVE COVID-19 EVIDENCE GATHERING

• Do all committees have access to SDD in their policy areas?

• Do all committees have access to gender expertise (e.g. secondment of external specialists, specialists among the parliamentary staff, including parliamentary library) to support their COVID-19 inquiries?

• In undertaking their COVID-19 inquiries, what efforts are made by Committees to specifically target women’s organizations and civil society organizations (CSOs) to submit oral or written evidence?

• Has gender sensitive parliamentary stakeholder mapping been undertaken and used for COVID-19 inquiries? Do committees have sufficient administrative capacity to efficiently and effectively undertake such mapping?

• Is there financial and/or parliamentary childcare provision to facilitate the participation of witnesses with childcare responsibilities?

• Is there training and support for new witnesses to give oral and/or provide written evidence, including through ICTs?

• Do any Committee rules need to be reviewed (or ‘suspended’) to facilitate digital/virtual participation of witnesses?

• What monitoring processes have been established to collect data on the diversity of witnesses coming before committees?

GENDER SENSITIVE ANALYSIS OF EVIDENCE

• Have gender budgeting tools been used to assess the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance and impact of COVID-19 related expenditures on women and girls?

• Have COVID-19-related policies, laws and programmes considered the key targets or beneficiaries?

• What is left out?

• Who will benefit and who will lose out?

• Who or what is to receive the policy, programme or legislation’s resources and benefits?

• How are the resources/benefits distributed?

• Do women and men equally access these, in practice?

• Are there any women only rules of distribution?

• Are women and men equally able to use these resources, in practice?

• What are the social and economic (i) costs and (ii) gains to both men and women of the policy, programme, or law under review?

• Does the policy or programme intervention worsen, maintain or challenge existing gender relations?
### Gender sensitive COVID-19 reporting and recommendations

- To what extent are gender sensitive recommendations being made by the committee in (i) formal reports; and (ii) other committee outputs?

- Are recommendations **gender specific or gender neutral?**

- What monitoring processes have been established to analyse government and parliamentary responses to gender sensitive recommendations made by the Committee?

- Where gender discrimination and inequality are revealed by the Committee, what actions have been/will be undertaken:
  - Speaking with the Minister responsible?
  - Raising the matter on the floor of the House or through other appropriate parliamentary action?
  - Taking the issue up with the designated parliamentary leader and or women’s parliamentary body tasked with responsibility for gender sensitive COVID-19?
  - Networking with members ‘across the floor’ to propose new legislation or amendments?
  - Raising the issue with the media?

### Checklist Part 3: Parliamentary Representation

### Consultation and Communication with Women Constituents

- Are women’s voices heard in parliament as it responds to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially where social distancing measures are in place?
  - Have you considered virtual town halls, text messages through mobile devices, community online surveys?
  - Have you sought the advice of, or requested information from:
    - Women’s organisations? Peak bodies that represent CSOs, non-government organisations, and international NGOs?
    - Trade unions that represent female dominant workforces (e.g. health workers, childcare workers, teachers)?
    - Gender-responsive economists;
    - Women academics that specialise in pandemics, gender-based violence, gender economics, women’s leadership?
  - Have you raised the concerns heard among these groups with:
    - The Head of State/Government?
    - The relevant Minister or Parliamentary Secretary/Junior Minister, or Minister for Women?
• Shadow Ministers/Leader of the Opposition?
• The Presiding Officer or other political leader of the Parliament?
• The women’s parliamentary body tasked with responsibility for gender sensitive responses to COVID-19?

• Has the parliament put in place an external communications strategy, including dedicated website pages to showcase how parliament is meeting the gender specific needs of women during the crisis?

PROMOTING THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE COMMUNITY RESPONSE

• Have MPs nominated, or encouraged the participation of women in their community to crisis management teams and pandemic relief task forces?

WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN ELECTORAL POLITICS

• What is the timetable for upcoming elections at the national, regional and local levels?
• What planning has been undertaken to determine whether these might need to be postponed?
• Has this planning process involved gender experts?
• Has this planning had access to SDD regarding women’s participation rates?

• Where consideration of online or postal voting has occurred, have gender equality impact assessments been undertaken? For instance:
  • What consideration has been given to different electoral registration schemes on women’s participation rates?
  • What consideration has been given to questions of gender differentiated access to the Internet or mobile phones?
  • What consideration has been given to women who may lack literacy or ‘national’ language skills?

THE MEDIA

• What is the ratio of women and men journalists with special parliamentary access?
• What consideration has been given to achieving parity amongst journalists, to facilitate gender sensitive coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic?

CHECKLIST PART 4: PARLIAMENTARY EVALUATION AND STRATEGIC THINKING

GENDER SENSITIVE REFLECTION

• In the post pandemic environment – or where this lasts longer than 6 months from the point of lockdown and/or social distancing – has the parliament’s governing body, gender equality body tasked with COVID-19 GSP responsibility, or MPs, MPs’ staff and/or parliamentary staff been invited to review the questions in this checklist (Parts 1-3)?

• Questions to include:
  • What actions were taken to ensure a gender sensitive parliamentary response to the pandemic?
  • What impact did the actions have?
  • What challenges arose in implementing any changes, and how were they addressed?
  • Has this exercise prompted interest in conducting a gender sensitive audit or self-assessment (e.g. using the EIGE, IPU or OECD toolkits, or the CPA guidelines)?
APPLYING LESSONS TO THE ‘NEW NORMAL’

• What gender sensitive changes made to the parliament’s procedures or outputs during the pandemic can be maintained in its aftermath?
  
  • Will temporary standing orders be made permanent?
  
  • Will outreach to gender experts become systematic and sustained?
  
  • Will gender specialist media coverage be required?

PREPARING FOR A FUTURE ‘BUSINESS DISRUPTION’

• Have gender sensitive lessons been incorporated into the parliament’s existing business continuity plan or corporate strategy?

LESSON-LEARNING WITH OTHER PARLIAMENTS

• Following the pandemic, what opportunities can be taken to share lessons in gender sensitive parliamentary responses with other parliaments regionally or internationally?

• How will those lessons be shared with all MPs and parliamentary staff?
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.

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to implement these standards. It stands behind women’s equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five priority areas: increasing women’s leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes; enhancing women’s economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system’s work in advancing gender equality.