



HIGHLIGHTS - Special session of the Working Party on Gender Mainstreaming and Governance on responding to Covid-19

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This paper presents the highlights from the discussions of the special session of the Working Party on Gender Mainstreaming and Governance, held on 29 April 2020. It provides an overview of country responses and priorities for the Working Party in responding to the crisis. It also recapitulates the discussions on ways to achieve resilient national gender machineries with a view to support gender-responsive recovery.



1. The Working Party for Gender Mainstreaming and Governance (hereafter referred as the GMG) has been established under the auspices of the OECD Public Governance Committee. It is a pioneering decision-making body within the OECD bringing together representatives from central gender equality institutions across OECD members and partner countries.

2. The Extra-ordinary Meeting of the GMG was convened with the aim of mapping the gender dimensions of the Covid-19 crisis; understanding its implications on existing governance infrastructures; and identifying policy options going forward. The meeting was chaired by Ms. Lina Nilsson, Deputy Director, Division for Gender Equality, Ministry of Employment, Government Offices of Sweden and benefitted from the participation of over a hundred of representatives across gender equality institutions, centres of government and the ministries of foreign affairs from the OECD member and partner countries. It also included the representatives of partner international organisations including UN WOMEN and European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE).

3. This document presents highlights from the discussions with the aim to identify country responses and priorities for the GMG in response to the crisis. It also recapitulates the policy dialogue on the governance approaches to achieve resilient national gender machineries and options to support inclusive recovery strategies in the medium and long-term.

An overview of the short-term impact of COVID-19 on men and women

4. The meeting provided the opportunity to present the OECD policy brief "[Women at the core of the fight against COVID-19 crisis](#)". It also presented the findings and the work of international partners such as UN WOMEN and EIGE in this field. The session highlighted alignment and complementarity between the findings and preliminary policy solutions put forward by these organisations.

5. In particular, the session highlighted the varying dimensions of Covid-19 pandemic impact men and women differently. While the death rate seems to be higher among men, measures like confinement pose a high risk to women's health and well-being. While they represent 70% of the **frontline healthcare workers**, only 25% of women occupy **decision-making positions in healthcare**. Across the OECD, women spend up to two hours more per day on an average on **unpaid care**, as compared to men. In developing countries, over 90% women engaging in non-agricultural work are in the informal economy, devoid of social security or employment benefits. Women's employment rate is hit adversely, particularly in vulnerable economies due to overrepresentation in part-time work and informal economy. The **digital divide** further complicates this risk. Women face increased **risk of violence during confinement**, reflected in an average increase of 30% in calls for support services.

6. The OECD policy brief draws lessons from impact on employment of past crises like 2008 financial crisis, characterised by increased work hours by women in the early years but faster improvement in men's employment in the recovery phase. However, differences in sectoral impact urge for caution in speculating the exact nature of impact of the pandemic on men and women. While several countries have introduced additional income support, there is a need to widen the eligibility criteria, particularly for non-standard workers and low-income families. Policy options for workers with care responsibilities include alternative childcare facilities, direct financial support to workers, emergency care supports (e.g. childcare vouchers). As lockdowns are being eased, it is also important to mitigate losses faced by children due to school closures, as well as preparing parents for a potential second-wave of the pandemic. It is critical to ensure health, shelter and justice systems remain accessible to survivors during lockdown. Measures can include the integration of prevention and service deliveries in emergency responses, designating these services as essential and moving these online, collecting disaggregated data on GBV and strengthening capacity of services to support demand.



7. Targeted measures are essential in responding to the widening gender inequalities in the context of the pandemic. It is equally important to incorporate gender lens in all policy measures. Embedding gender impact assessments in emergency responses requires a well-functioning system with access to gender disaggregated data, technical skills and a diverse representation in the consultation process. Government tools such as gender budgeting and gender-responsive procurement can help countries in understanding the collective impact of the stimulus and recovery packages on gender equality, and support inclusive recovery.

An overview of targeted country initiatives and policy responses

8. The meeting followed with a roundtable on the critical issues that are currently managed by the gender equality institutions in response to Covid-19 crisis. The roundtable also provided examples of targeted and gender mainstreaming measures. Tackling gender-based violence emerged as the highest priority, along with pursuing women's economic empowerment, alleviating the burden of unpaid care work and protecting women's fundamental rights and access to justice. The following paragraphs provide a snapshot of the key policy responses and measures taken by OECD countries and other GMG participant countries.

Policies for dealing with violence against women

9. Country responses to violence against women (VAW) range from introducing new policy and legal mechanisms to tackle the increasing cases, facilitate access to assistance and shelters for survivors, to boosting the capacity of agencies and organisations working with women facing the threat of violence and survivors.

Policy and legal mechanisms and tools

10. A common measure taken by countries (e.g. **Mexico, Norway**) is declaring agencies and organisations that provide assistance to victims of violence as essential services to ensure continued access to aid despite restrictions on movements. Examples of countries that have introduced new institutional mechanisms to tackle VAW in the face of the pandemic include **Spain** and **Chile** (with a Contingency Plan to respond to domestic violence), **Switzerland** (with a national taskforce on domestic violence representing federal offices headed by Federal Office for Gender Equality) and Lithuania (with an inter-institutional plan for GBV). In **Sweden**, the Minister for Gender Equality has had meetings with organisations and authorities that work on this issue to monitor the situation. **Australia** has also announced a 150 million dollars domestic violence package to provide critical emergency response services.

Access to helplines

11. While a number of countries have introduced helplines for women facing violence (**Spain, Egypt, Slovak Republic, Tunisia, Lithuania, Chile**, etc.), due to the nature of emergency responses, confinement with the perpetrator discourages the use of these helplines. Many countries are finding innovative means to provide women access to help. These include alternative helplines that have been set-up through WhatsApp in **Spain**, SMS services in **France**, and email services in **Denmark**. An innovative practice, as seen in **Chile, Spain** and **France**, is the use of the code word "Facemask 19" in pharmacies, which then identify the women seeking assistance. In **Tunisia**, psychological support is provided through helplines.



Awareness campaigns

12. Countries like **Switzerland, Mexico, Norway, Latvia, Spain, Netherlands, Greece** and **Italy** are conducting awareness campaigns through different media, including online platforms and local-level enterprises like pharmacies, to encourage women to approach help, while also targeting bystanders to increase reporting and prevention efforts. An interesting measure used by countries involves awareness campaigns targeted to men prone to violence to encourage them to seek psychological and behavioural help.

Agencies and organisations working with women

13. Several countries highlighted the legal and justice component of the increase in domestic violence, emphasising training and capacity building of the police and legal aid teams. Efforts to this extent have been taken in **Norway, Netherlands** and **Greece**, including sensitivity-training and guidelines to the police to prioritise cases of domestic violence.

14. Countries, including **Slovak Republic, Canada, Italy** and **United States**, are monitoring the availability of resources and capacity of shelters and assistance centres. To boost the capacity of assistance centres, shelters and organisations working on domestic violence issues, countries like Italy (5 billion euros), Sweden (9 million euros) have earmarked monetary support.

Other measures

15. Along with the aforementioned measures, countries continue to use innovative policies and measures to alleviate the impact of emergency responses on women facing violence. **Lithuania** and **Tunisia** are planning to allow accommodations reserved for isolation and quarantining to be used as shelters for survivors. **Korea**, recognising the increase in digital sex crimes, has undertaken proactive efforts to tackle this (e.g. protection of children and youth, deleting pictures). To encourage identification of families and personnel facing violence at home, **Netherlands** and **Chile** are engaging with private sector networks and professionals (e.g. human resources) who are likely to come in contact with families experiencing violence to detect signs of GBV.

Financial measures targeted at women

16. Certain countries announced financial measures and subsidies targeted to women or sectors where women are over-represented. For example, **Spain** announced a special subsidy for registered domestic workers. Other financial measures include expansion of criteria covering the proposed financial measures, as seen in case of **Mexico** and **Australia**.

Policies to assist working women

17. To ease the burden of unpaid care work, particularly due to school closures, several countries have chosen to keep childcare centres functional, with some countries such as **Switzerland** and **Italy** providing financial support for childcare services. **Korea** is providing alternative and home-based care services, while schools in **Finland** continue to provide lunches. **Australia** is providing funded childcare services for women in essential services.

18. Parental benefits like extension or top-ups for parental allowance (**Latvia, Canada**) and extended parental leaves (**Italy**) are aimed at mitigating the impact of lockdown measures for parents. Other measures include provision of sickness benefits and incapacity certificates to those taking care of the elderly, children and persons with disability, as in the case of **Lithuania**.



Countries are also encouraging and facilitating the use of flexible working policies. In **Spain** for example, a legislation was adopted containing urgent measures like remote working, right to adapt working hours, etc.

Women, peace and security

19. **The United States** is promoting leadership, monitoring responses and working to include women's participation in recovery efforts through its women's peace and security agenda.

Public governance, institutions and tools for bouncing forward

Gender-sensitive emergency responses

20. While targeted measures to deal with challenges faced by women during the crisis are essential, participants underlined that it is crucial to incorporate gender lens in all the emergency response measures. Given the current gender imbalances in decisions making positions in all branches of power, emergency responses do not necessarily reflect and integrate perspectives of diverse stakeholders. While correcting this imbalance may not be feasible in the immediate term, it is possible to actively diversify consultation processes and ensure that women from diverse backgrounds are well represented.

21. There is a general consensus on the importance of using GIA processes and tools in emergency management; as well as using gender budgeting for response and stimulus packages. Given the time-sensitive nature of emergency responses, it often becomes challenging for countries to mobilize such tools. As regards major challenges faced by gender equality institutions in responding to the crisis, more than half of the respondents identified absence of readily available data and limited resources of the central gender institutions. It is also essential to have the necessary technological infrastructure for processing data. Another important bottleneck that was identified is the limited possibility to influence decision-making structures.

22. It was stressed that embedding gender impact assessments in emergency responses therefore requires a well-functioning system with access to gender disaggregated data, technical skills and a diverse representation in the consultation process. Indeed, ensuring swift gender analysis in emergency response has been identified among the highest priorities across the OECD according to the preliminary results of the OECD questionnaire on tackling the effects of Covid-19 addressed to gender equality institutions. For example, acknowledging the limited use of gender impact assessments in the emergency responses to Covid-19, **Ireland** is developing training for public employees as a priority next step.

23. In the absence of GIA tools in place to mobilise in the emergency context, leveraging existing consultation structures can be helpful to inform the decisions from a gender perspective. A number of countries have mobilized their existing inter-ministerial co-ordination structures to support gender-sensitive policy responses (e.g., **France, Czech Republic and Morocco**). The crisis has also provided impetus for building new coalitions. For example, **Canada and Italy** established the Taskforce on Equity-seeking Communities and COVID-19, and the special Taskforce "Women for a new Renaissance" respectively (*please see next section for further information*).

24. When a gender impact assessment is not possible in an emergency decision-making situation, countries stressed that it is important to seek ways to ensure that the implementation of such decisions consider differentiated impacts. For example, **Norway** and **Egypt** are advancing work on closely monitoring the gender effects of the emergency measures.



Measures with an intersectional focus

25. Participants noted that the crisis has highlighted the importance of having an intersectional approach to gender mainstreaming. Not all women experience the impacts of crisis in a similar manner. **Norway** and **Finland** noted the difficulties in reaching out to marginalised sections of the population, including immigrant population (overwhelmingly affected), persons with disabilities, and trans and gay youth. **Finland** has been cooperating with NGOs and has published information on Covid-19 in different languages, keeping in mind the most vulnerable population, particularly the Somali population. **Greece** has launched “Project Survivor” to facilitate transport for refugee and migrant women during the crisis. **United Kingdom** highlighted the multifaceted risks faced by pregnant women during the pandemic, ranging from direct health risks to provision of social security to women on maternity leave. In **Canada**, targeted subsidies have been granted for organisations and shelter homes working with women facing violence, with special funds earmarked for organisations working with indigenous communities. **Ireland** also noted the need for an intersectional lens through disaggregation of data across all equality dimensions, such as sex and ethnicity, noting that the OECD can work to reinforce the importance of this aspect.

Robust and resilient national gender machineries

26. There is a need to have well-functioning formal and informal systems in place, accompanied by sound knowledge from past crises and support from political leadership to enable incorporation of the gender lens in each step of the decision-making process, as highlighted by **Iceland**. While many countries have mobilised existing structures to support gender-sensitive policy responses, some have established new mechanisms and coalitions to deal with the challenges posed by the pandemic. For example, in **Canada**, an initiative to formalise a previously informal system of gender focal points across federal departments, led to the launch of the Taskforce on Equity-seeking Communities and COVID-19.

27. **Switzerland** highlighted the need for the need for quantitative and qualitative data in studies and surveys done to influence decision-making by emergency response task forces, noting that the upcoming 8th Data Forum on Gender Statistics by UN World Data Forum in October 2020 would be a good opportunity to further work on gender-disaggregated data and indicators in the context of the pandemic. **Sweden** pointed that while a majority of crisis response actions have included gender impact assessments, the quality of the assessments could be questioned mainly due to the urgency and lack of sex disaggregated data.

28. In order to facilitate inclusion of the gender perspective in emergency responses, it is essential that the gender institutions reach out and establish a relationship with the national task forces, as was done in **Switzerland**. Similarly, in **Ireland**, the Department of Justice and Equality is pushing for incorporating a gender perspective as well as intersectional perspective (particularly vulnerable groups e.g. Roma population) in the potential research on impact of the crisis, through participation in one of the governance structures integral to Irish emergency response.

29. **Switzerland** urged the need for a recommendation outlining policies and measures to help governments account for women’s needs to ensure gender inclusive crisis management and recovery, noting that the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (S/RES/1325) could pave the way for such a recommendation.

Proposed Next Steps

30. The Covid-19 crisis is a major challenge but also offers an opportunity to rebuild a more gender inclusive governance systems and societies. The Special Session of the GMG aimed to reflect on how the OECD can best support country efforts during this crisis, and to accordingly adjust its work programme.



According to the preliminary results of the short OECD survey on Covid-19 responses, almost all respondent countries highlighted the importance of generating evidence, producing analysis and sharing good practices as areas where OECD and GMG can contribute to better response and recovery. Some countries have also called to consider developing standards (Switzerland) and tools to support governments (Norway) to support exit strategies and recovery. In this regard, the responses to the survey as well as the discussions from the Special Session will be incorporated into a policy brief, estimated for publication in June 2020.

31. In order to be flexible to the Covid-19 crisis and the post-Covid era, the OECD proposed slight updates to the work programme of GMG for 2020 and for the next biennium.

Proposed outputs for 2020 and 2021-22

2020

- Policy brief on governance & gender equality in Covid-19 era
- Strengthening governance approaches to tackling VAW (update with Covid-19)
- Framework for inclusive workplaces in the post Covid-19 era, including the use of behavioural approaches
- Gender responsive procurement (an analytical report)
- Core indicators (work in progress)
- Thematic work on deepening the intersectional approach to promoting gender equality
- Peer review studies (based on country demand)

2021-22

- A Monitoring report on the 2015 Recommendation on Gender Equality in Public Life
- Analytical framework on gender sensitive governance together with indicators and a survey (updated for COVID-19)
- Strengthening governance approaches to tackling VAW (survey and comparative country report)
- Thematic work on violence against women and on addressing gender pay gaps, and advancing gender-lens in crisis situations including through resilient gender machineries
- Core indicators
- Peer review studies (based on country demand)

32. As indicated by the preliminary survey results, violence against women (VAW) remains a top priority for all members. The call for technical advisory group on VAW will be launched in May/June, with the aim of brainstorming and providing guidance for OECD work on this issue. The draft paper on “Strengthening Public Governance Approaches to Eliminating Violence Against Women: Towards An Overview of Elements of Good Practice” [GOV/PGC/GMG(2020)2] will also be updated in the context of current crisis.

HIGHLIGHTS

