



© Jawad Jalali/ADB

How to build a more equal world

Like other global crises, the pandemic disproportionately affects women. It shows that nothing less than urgent, radical, transformative action is needed to create a post-COVID-19 world that empowers all women and girls

By **Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka**,
Executive Director, UN Women

Just as the World Health Organization identified COVID-19 as a pandemic, UN Women launched our analysis of the global status of women's rights, showing limited and fragile progress in the 25 years since the adoption of the landmark Beijing Platform for Action on gender equality. The year 2020 also marks the first major staging point for the Sustainable Development Goals

(SDGs), five years after Member States unanimously adopted the 2030 Agenda. The pandemic's impacts have revealed and intensified the precarious situation of women, especially in terms of their economic security, physical safety and access to decision-making spaces.

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed serious problems with the ways we have constructed our societies and economies on the backs of women's unpaid labour. This uncomfortable insight links to important

questions about the kind of world that we want to live in, and how we get there. As we enter the Decade of Action on the SDGs, there is an opportunity to 'build back better', with women's rights at the centre, to prioritise care for people and planet, and to energise progress on gender equality, for the benefit of all.

COVID-19's profound impacts on labour and poverty

Over the last 25 years, we have seen

◀ **Kabul, Afghanistan. A production studio at Zan TV, a station making programmes for and run entirely by women**

women's participation in the labour force stagnate. This was already a deep concern because of the importance of economic empowerment for other aspects of gender equality. It is even more worrying because of the quality and nature of women's jobs. Women are over-represented among the informally employed, in jobs that lack social protection such as sick leave or health insurance.

In many developing countries, most women are employed in domestic work, or jobs that require them to be in public spaces, like market trading. As countries have locked down, those jobs have been lost to protect public health, leaving millions of women with no livelihood. Without support from government measures that recognise their situation, women face the impossible choice of risking exposure to the virus or going hungry. At the same time, day-care centres and schools have shut, pushing care work back into homes and dramatically increasing it – for women. There is some evidence that men are taking on a little more, and campaigns like #HeForSheAtHome have raised the profile of domestic equality, with one billion views of the campaign on TikTok in India alone.

However, this work is still hugely unequally distributed, with women doing three times as much as men. In countries with weak health systems, it is women who are stepping up to care for the sick at home, often at considerable risk to their own health. Meanwhile, as available resources are drawn into the COVID-19 response, sexual and reproductive health services are suffering (as in previous crises), threatening progress made on reducing maternal mortality.

Without determined and targeted action, the resulting hardship will be profound. UN Women's research shows that in 2021 alone, 47 million women and girls could be pushed into extreme poverty as a result of COVID-19, bringing the total to 435 million. Women of reproductive age will be disproportionately affected by the pandemic, compared with men.

During this crisis, the combination of economic devastation and stay-at-home orders have trapped millions of women in domestic settings with violent abusers. We know from service providers – mostly small-scale women's organisations – that demand for their support has increased as much as fivefold. As work and public services have moved online, cyber violence has intensified, with new forms of violence such as 'Zoom-bombing' emerging to intimidate and harass women and girls. And, in parallel, violence in public spaces is increasing as women and girls venture out across deserted streets between home and work.

The UN Secretary-General urged governments to put women and girls at the centre of their efforts to recover from COVID-19, with equal representation and decision-making power. So far, 146 countries have committed to make the prevention and redress of violence against women and girls a key part of their national response plans. These include proactive efforts to integrate measures in preparedness and recovery plans to address violence, and ensure they are adequately resourced. This is certainly an area where greater prioritisation is desperately needed. It is estimated that between 2014 and 2019, investment in the prevention of violence against women and girls totalled less than 0.002 per cent of annual official development assistance.

Political leadership is crucial to mobilising these essential changes and reflecting women's specific needs in the development, scrutiny and monitoring of COVID-19 policies, plans and budgets. Women are heads of state or government in just 22 countries, yet in countries like Denmark, Ethiopia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, New Zealand and Slovakia they are being recognised for their efforts to 'flatten the curve'.

Building back better for women and girls

As the world learns to live with COVID-19 and starts to rebuild and recover, we must seize the opportunity to go beyond fragile, incremental progress, to more transformative change. This is what Agenda 2030 demands of us. What are the key

elements of an agenda to 'build back better', encompassing visionary alternatives for sustainable and inclusive economies and societies?

Support for the care economy must be a major part of the answer. Feminists have been saying for years that the care economy is the foundation of the global economy. Now, COVID-19 has catapulted the care economy into the public consciousness as never before. The vast amount of care and domestic work – either unpaid or poorly paid – that women have always done in homes, schools, hospitals and communities has been the backbone of the COVID-19 response.

To recognise, value and support this work, we need public investment in integrated care systems to provide care from cradle to grave. This would include investing in recruiting, training and providing safe working conditions for healthcare workers at every level, from doctors to community health workers and unpaid carers in homes.

Some 18 million more health workers will be needed by 2030 to achieve universal health coverage and the SDGs. Filling this gap would bolster health systems, enabling them to provide essential services like responding to violence as well as sexual and reproductive healthcare, and to be ready for future pandemics. It would also create decent public-sector jobs for women, helping to address the deficits in women's economic opportunities.

Care must be integrated into universal and gender-responsive social protection systems to ensure basic access to income and services. During the current pandemic, the availability of paid leave, cash transfers and food for families has been a lifeline for millions. The countries that already had robust social protection systems in place have been able to weather the crisis more effectively than those starting from scratch. Fewer than three people in ten worldwide enjoy access to comprehensive social security. Now is the time to accelerate efforts towards universality of these basic rights.

A green recovery

The idea of care has traditionally been applied to the care of people, but what if

5 GENDER EQUALITY



Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls



25%

In national parliaments



36%

In local government

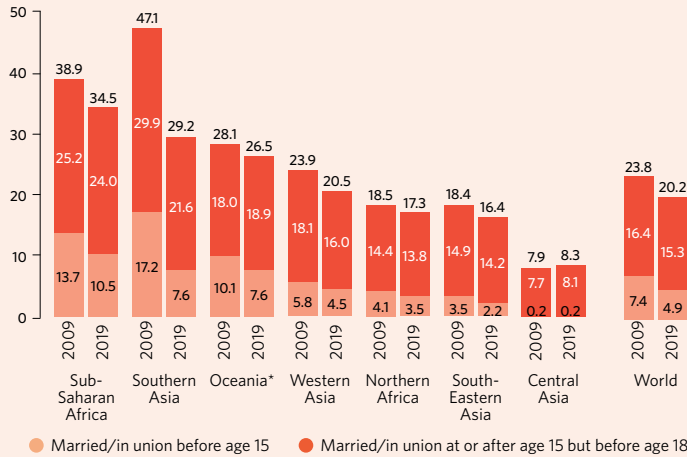
◀ Women must be represented fairly in pandemic-related leadership roles

Women are on the front lines of fighting the coronavirus ▶



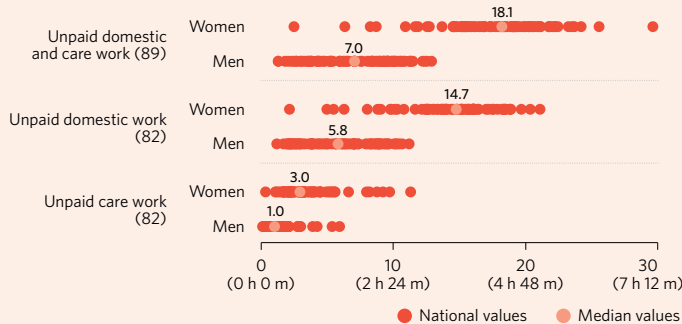
Women account for 70% of health and social workers

Proportion of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married or in union before age 15 and before age 18, around 2009 and around 2019



* Excluding Australia and New Zealand.

Proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work, women and men, 2001-2018 (latest available) (percentage of time spent per day)



Source: Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020

we extended that idea to care for the planet too? Like unpaid care work, the value of natural resources and environmental services (such as the capacity of the oceans or forests to absorb carbon) has too often been invisible to policymakers and economists.

Yet, as the ability of the natural environment to provide these services erodes, failure to care for the planet will make it increasingly inhospitable. It is the poorest women in the poorest countries who will suffer most, although they have done the least to cause the problem.

We should not miss the opportunity to make the recovery from COVID-19 into a green recovery, and to set the environmental SDGs back on track. This means accelerating the transition away from carbon-intensive, polluting economies, through investments in renewable energy and sustainable infrastructure, such as water, electricity and transport.

To ensure this shift is a ‘just transition’, women must have access to the reskilling needed to ensure that they have access to these new green jobs.

The cost of success?

All of this requires finance, which is in short supply. The International Monetary Fund predicts there will be an unprecedented global contraction of 4.9 per cent in 2020. The economic shock triggered by COVID-19 hit the global economy at a time when it was already plagued by rising inequality in wealth and income, financial fragility and unsustainable debt burdens. The macroeconomic challenges are daunting, but we also know from previous crises that austerity, which damages economies and hurts the poorest the most, cannot be the answer.

As policymakers face up to the difficult issues ahead, perhaps one simple question can help to focus their minds. What is the economy for? If we could reorient the economy to be at the service of achieving economic and social rights for all, instead of GDP growth at any cost, then we would get very much closer to keeping the promises of the SDGs, and, with women and girls, build a more equal world. ●