

# Addressing the Impact of COVID-19 on Women, Girls and LGBTI Persons: Policy Recommendations for Parliamentarians

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare and exacerbated inequality in countries worldwide. Social and economic inequities render some populations, including women and girls, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) persons, more vulnerable during emergencies. Measures to curb the spread of the pandemic, such as restricted mobility, quarantines and stay-at-home orders, have a differential impact on vulnerable populations, leading to an increase in family/domestic and gender-based violence, food insecurity, stigma and discrimination and limited access to health services.

In the context of the United Nation's [2030 Agenda](#) and its vision of “leaving no one behind,” parliamentarians around the world have a crucial responsibility to ensure the protection and promotion of the rights of their constituents, especially vulnerable populations, by adopting all-inclusive measures and mitigating the gendered impact of the pandemic. As lawmakers and leaders, parliamentarians should assess the extent to which people's needs are adequately covered and provide oversight for their government's COVID-19 response and recovery plan. In the short term, it is necessary to quickly identify gaps in national policies and consider re-allocating resources to vulnerable groups whose needs have been overlooked. In the long term, the policy-making process will benefit from establishing a **rights-based, gendered and intersectional** approach as well as channels for civil society and the general population to articulate their concerns.<sup>1</sup>

To highlight the plight of women, girls and LGBTI persons around the world in the era of COVID-19 and provide parliamentarians with concrete, evidence-based policy recommendations, Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA) has prepared this brief as a tool to assist with “building back better” underpinned by inclusion and equality. The brief focuses on seven major issues: leadership representation, communications, gender-based violence, healthcare, social and economic protections, education and intersectionality. Each section provides general policy recommendations, followed by specific examples of practices adopted by parliaments worldwide to tackle the problems in the context of COVID-19.

### **1) Representation of Women and LGBTI Persons in Decision-Making**

One important step to ensuring that governments will implement a gender-sensitive pandemic response and uphold values of equality and non-discrimination post-COVID-19 is to increase leadership roles for women and LGBTI people at all levels and include relevant civil society organizations in the decision-making processes. In many parts of the world, governments have excluded community organizations from important discussions even though the latter have taken on the responsibility of providing and caring for their communities where governmental attention falls short, thus often resulting in counter-productive measures.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, these organizations often hold key information about vulnerable populations needed to make thoughtful and informed policies.

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<sup>1</sup> “COVID-19 in Women's Lives: Reasons to Recognize the Differential Impacts,” *Organization of American States*, May 1, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/covid-19-women-s-lives-reasons-recognize-differential-impacts>.

<sup>2</sup> Lydia Namubiru, Khatondi Soita Wepukhulu, and Kerry Cullinan. “Sex workers abandoned as COVID crackdowns undo Africa's HIV efforts,” *Open Democracy*, June 5, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/sex-workers-abandoned-as-covid-crackdowns-undo-africas-hiv-efforts/>.

Currently, the majority of national-level parliamentary committees established to handle the COVID-19 pandemic do not have enough female representation. On average, women only make up 24% of such committees.<sup>3</sup> There is no similar available data on LGBTI people's representation.

To increase the participation of women and LGBTI persons in decision-making and introduce more comprehensive and effective COVID-19 policies, parliamentarians are advised to:

- Consult with women and LGBTI civil society organizations on how to best meet community needs;
- Call for the creation of special task forces or other governmental bodies focused on women and LGBTI issues to incorporate into the governmental response structure;<sup>4</sup>
- Ensure the participation of experts and community organizations as an independent and specialized voice;<sup>5</sup>
- Allocate resources to community-led monitoring and reporting initiatives on the rights of women and LGBTI persons at the local and national levels;
- Consider affirmative action procedures to make the parliamentary election process more inclusive of key stakeholders, such as women and LGBTI persons.

## Country-Specific Practices

### ***Africa***

*South Africa:* The government has provided relief funds for non-governmental service providers.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Asia***

*Nepal:* The Women and Social Committee of the Federal Parliament held expert consultations on the implications of COVID-19 response for those at risk, including women and children.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Europe***

*Georgia:* The Georgian Parliament has adopted a 25% gender quota to ensure that women will be better represented in the legislative assemblies.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Latin America and the Caribbean***

*Chile:* The President of the Senate and the Chairwoman of the Gender and Labor Committees of the Chamber of Deputies convened a roundtable discussion on gender and COVID-19 along with 80 civil society organizations.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Where Are the Women? The Conspicuous Absence of Women in COVID-19 Response Teams and Plans, and Why We Need Them," *Care International*, June 2020, <https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/publications/why-we-need-women-in-covid-19-response-teams-and-plans>.

<sup>4</sup> "COVID-19 in Women's Lives."

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> "Women, Peace and Human Security: A Guidance Note on Parliamentary Engagement During and Post-COVID-19," *UNDP*, November 11, 2020, <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/womens-empowerment/Women-Peace-and-Human-Security-Covid-a-Guidance-Note-on-Parliamentary-Engagement-During-and-Post-Covid-19.html>.

<sup>7</sup> "Women, Peace and Human Security."

<sup>8</sup> Giorgi Lomsadze, "Georgia takes on male-dominated parliament with gender quotas," *Eurasianet*, July 13, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-takes-on-male-dominated-parliament-with-gender-quotas>.

<sup>9</sup> "Women, Peace and Human Security."

## ***North America***

*Canada:* With more than half of the country's national COVID-19 response team comprised of women, Canada has emerged as a leader in the way the government integrated women in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

### **2) Fighting Disinformation and Raising Awareness**

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, some political and religious leaders have falsely blamed LGBTI communities for the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> As a result, there has been an increase in LGBTI-phobia around the world, and public authorities, such as the police, have often used discriminatory rhetoric and exploited COVID-19 directives to attack and target LGBTI individuals.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, there has been a lack of accurate and comprehensive data on the gendered impacts of the pandemic, which could inform policy-making and be used to raise awareness of the specific needs of women, girls and LGBTI persons. In terms of communications campaigns, while most people today access information via smartphone and/or other electronic devices, a large portion of these populations, particularly those residing in rural areas, do not have access to Internet connectivity and/or smart devices, and therefore need to be informed through more traditional channels.<sup>13</sup>

To fight stigmatization and discrimination and make COVID-19 information more accessible to women, girls and LGBTI persons, parliamentarians are advised to:

- Ensure that updated, accurate and transparent information about the gendered risks of COVID-19 and available support for women, girls and LGBTI persons are in clear and multiple languages to be disseminated through the most accessible channels, such as the Internet, social media and radio.<sup>14</sup>
- Create information campaigns specifically on the prevention of, and fight against, violence;<sup>15</sup>
- Speak out in parliament and condemn harmful practices against women and girls as well as anti-LGBTI hate speech and scapegoating;<sup>16</sup>
- Call for the training of law enforcement officials and public servants in general to not discriminate against LGBTI persons and to instead proactively identify and report cases of abuse of power; and
- Call on relevant Ministries to collect comprehensive age- and sex-disaggregated data on the situation of women, girls and LGBTI persons during the pandemic.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Levon Sevunts, "Canada leads 30 countries in gender-responsive COVID-19 action: report," *RCI*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.rcinet.ca/en/2020/06/10/canada-leads-30-countries-in-gender-responsive-covid-19-action-report/>.

<sup>11</sup> "Vulnerability Amplified: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on LGBTIQ People," *Outright International*, May 6, 2020, <https://outrightinternational.org/content/vulnerability-amplified-impact-covid-19-pandemic-lgbtqi-people>.

<sup>12</sup> "COVID-19 and the Human Rights of LGBTI People," *OHCHR*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/LGBT/LGBTIpeople.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> "COVID-19 in Women's Lives."

<sup>14</sup> "Guidance Note on CEDAW and COVID-19," *OHCHR*, [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CEDAW/Statements/CEDAW\\_Guidance\\_note\\_COVID-19.docx](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CEDAW/Statements/CEDAW_Guidance_note_COVID-19.docx).

<sup>15</sup> "COVID-19 in Women's Lives."

<sup>16</sup> "Vulnerability Amplified."

<sup>17</sup> "Guidance Note on CEDAW and COVID-19."

## Country-Specific Practices

### ***Africa***

Niger: A study on the causes and impacts of early marriage has been carried out in five regions.<sup>18</sup>

Sierra Leone: The Parliamentary Female Caucus is engaging local radio stations to sensitize constituents on COVID-19 and its gendered implications; state institutions and traditional leaders on security concerns and implications for women and girls; and border authorities on the safety and security of women trading along border communities.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Asia***

Nepal: The government is running public awareness campaigns on the negative impacts of child marriage.<sup>20</sup>

South Korea: After a cluster of new COVID-19 cases was traced to a prominent gay club in Itaewon resulting in increased homophobic sentiment, the government urged journalists and media personnel to exercise caution to prevent personal information from leaking.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Europe***

France: The government dedicated resources to investigate the gendered digital gap.<sup>22</sup>

Georgia: The Parliamentary Gender Equality Council is in the process of developing a gender analysis on the impact of the COVID-19 response on women and girls.<sup>23</sup>

Spain: The government published guidance for LGBTI persons on resources available to them, including economic, health and emotional support.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Latin America and the Caribbean***

Argentina: The Congressional Budget Office published a detailed report on how the COVID-19 pandemic is widening the economic gender gap.<sup>25</sup>

Honduras: The government has ordered the National Institute for Women (INAM) to create a massive information campaign to educate the public about the different types of violence against women. It has also gathered data on women's rights and gender-based violence.<sup>26</sup>

### ***North America***

United States: In Pennsylvania, the Governor highlighted government plans to collect data on LGBTI persons when studying the social impact of the pandemic, to ensure that the specific needs of LGBTI communities would be taken into account when enacting policies.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> High Level Political Forum 2020 and Voluntary National Review Analysis, UN, July 2020.

<sup>19</sup> "Women, Peace and Human Security."

<sup>20</sup> "High Level Political Forum 2020."

<sup>21</sup> Victor Madrigal-Borloz et al. "Protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity: note / by the Secretary-General," July 17, 2019, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3823802?ln=en>.

<sup>22</sup> "Women, Peace and Human Security."

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Victor Madrigal-Borloz et al.

<sup>25</sup> Victor Madrigal-Borloz et al.

<sup>26</sup> « CN aprueba medidas de prevención y protección para la mujer en confinamiento por COVID-19 », *La Tribuna*, July 31, 2020, <https://www.latribuna.hn/2020/07/31/cn-aprueba-medidas-de-prevencion-y-proteccion-para-la-mujer-en-confinamiento-por-covid-19/>.

<sup>27</sup> Victor Madrigal-Borloz et al.

### **3) Preventing and Combatting Gender-Based Violence (GBV)**

Globally, about 243 million women and girls aged 15-49 have suffered sexual and/or physical violence by an intimate partner since the COVID-19 outbreak.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, this number will only increase as many countries have been reporting higher rates of domestic violence since their lockdown measures were implemented. The surge has been as high as 33% in Singapore.<sup>29</sup>

LGBTI persons have also suffered from gender-based violence (GBV) during quarantine or lockdown. In particular, many youth are forced to leave their tight-knit and LGBTI-inclusive communities and go back to hostile home environments living with family members who often perpetuate discriminatory attitudes against the LGBTI population.<sup>30</sup> In some cases, LGBTI individuals are thrown out of the household and have to survive on the street.

It is worth noting that since a lot of people's daily activities and interactions have moved online due to the pandemic, the Internet has also emerged as a prominent channel for GBV. Some major forms of gender-based cyber violence behaviors that women and girls experience during the COVID-19 pandemic include cyber stalking, cyber bullying, cyber harassment and online sexual exploitation. Research shows that cyber violence can be just as damaging as physical violence.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, it is important to take the cyber space into consideration while enacting policies to combat GBV.

To prevent GBV and provide support for women, girls and LGBTI persons who are victims of violence, parliamentarians are advised to call on relevant Ministries and allocate enough resources to:

- Create information campaigns specifically on the prevention of and fight against violence;<sup>32</sup>
- Facilitate easily accessible means for filing complaints through the use of technology and/or community spaces such as pharmacies and supermarkets;<sup>33</sup>
- Guarantee that complaints of GBV will be attended to and that justice will be served;<sup>34</sup>
- Provide temporary shelters for victims of GBV and their families;
- Establish hotlines on GBV, counseling centers and psychological and legal care as essential services;<sup>35</sup>
- Train public servants, such as police and teachers, to deal with difficult situations and identify potential risks of violence, abandonment and exclusion;<sup>36</sup> and
- Generate safeguards for monitoring a responsible Internet infrastructure and promoting well-founded user care practices.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> "COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls," *UN Women*, 2020, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> "COVID-19 and the Human Rights of LGBTI People."

<sup>31</sup> Donald Flywell Malanga, "Tackling gender-based cyber violence against women and girls in Malawi amidst the COVID-19 pandemic," *Association for Progressive Communications*, June 28, 2020, <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/tackling-gender-based-cyber-violence-against-women-and-girls-malawi-amidst-covid-19-pandemic>.

<sup>32</sup> "COVID-19 in Women's Lives."

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

## Country-Specific Practices

### *Africa*

South Africa: In the Eastern Cape Province, the government has supported efforts to accelerate community-level service delivery for survivors of GBV, especially women in the informal economy as well as women and girls affected by HIV/AIDS.<sup>38</sup>

Uganda: The government established a toll-free Uganda Child Helpline (UCHL) to facilitate the reporting and tracking of child abuse cases. This helpline has been extended to also cover GBV.<sup>39</sup>

### *Asia*

China: The hashtag #AntiDomesticViolenceDuringEpidemic has taken off to help break the silence and expose violence as a risk during lockdown, along with links to online resources for victims seeking assistance.<sup>40</sup>

Japan: The government has extended its domestic violence counseling helplines to provide 24-hour coverage every day, in addition to integrating text messaging and email consultations into the services.<sup>41</sup>

### *Europe*

France: When shelters exceeded capacity, the government employed hotels to provide alternative accommodation for victims of domestic violence.<sup>42</sup> There is also a new reporting app called FLAG specifically designed for LGBTI individuals to easily report acts of violence and be directed to relevant services.<sup>43</sup>

Italy: Prosecutors have ruled that in situations of domestic violence, the perpetrator rather than the victim must leave the family home.<sup>44</sup> In the city of Naples, the government worked with local LGBTI associations to ensure that anti-violence shelters would also accept a quota of LGBTI people experiencing GBV.<sup>45</sup>

Spain: In the Canary Islands, women can alert pharmacies about a domestic violence case with a code message “Mask-19” that will bring in the police to intervene.<sup>46</sup>

### *Latin America and the Caribbean*

Argentina: The government addressed delays in the judicial processes and has extended protection orders for victims of violence to 60 days.<sup>47</sup>

Honduras: The National Emergency System (SNE) was ordered to design a mechanism, through the 911 telephone line, to have specialized and dedicated personnel exclusively to attend to women and girls who are victims of GBV.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls.”

<sup>39</sup> High Level Political Forum 2020.

<sup>40</sup> “COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls.”

<sup>41</sup> “Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: Report of the Secretary-General,” *UN Women*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/07/a-75-274-sg-report-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls>.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Victor Madrigal-Borloz et al.

<sup>44</sup> “Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence.”

<sup>45</sup> Victor Madrigal-Borloz et al.

<sup>46</sup> “Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence.”

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> « CN aprueba medidas de prevención y protección para la mujer en confinamiento por COVID-19 ».

## ***North America***

*Canada:* The government has kept domestic violence shelters open even during the lockdown. A Canadian aid package allocated \$50 million to support shelters for those facing GBV.<sup>49</sup>

### **4) Access to Healthcare and Health Services**

To tackle the COVID-19 global pandemic, many countries have chosen to divert important resources from essential health services for women, girls and LGBTI persons, further heightening their health risks. For instance, there is a growing de-prioritization of sexual and reproductive healthcare, which then contributes to increased maternal and newborn mortality, unmet need for contraception as well as cases of unsafe abortions and sexually transmitted infections.<sup>50</sup> For LGBTI populations specifically, the distribution of HIV-related drugs and services have been scaled back and, in some countries, stopped completely. But the most disrupted health services are those meant to prevent new HIV/AIDS infections, especially for individuals considered most at risk.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, heightened stigma and discrimination against LGBTI persons have resulted in unequal access and quality of healthcare. Since at least 70 countries still criminalize consensual same-sex relations and at least nine countries criminalize diverse forms of gender expression, many LGBTI individuals are afraid to seek out healthcare for fear of arrest or violence.<sup>52</sup>

Globally, women represent about 70% of the health and social sector workforce.<sup>53</sup> It is thus crucial to make sure that they have the necessary proper personal protection equipment (PPE) while working on the front line. Women living in rural areas might also have difficulty securing transportation between their homes and places of work as well as access to the healthcare they need.

To ensure equal access to healthcare and essential health services for all in this challenging time, parliamentarians are advised to provide oversight to their countries' relevant Ministries on Health/Gender/Social Protection to:

- Resolve delays and disruptions in access to healthcare for women, girls and LGBTI persons;<sup>54</sup>
- Establish sexual, reproductive and HIV-related health services as essential;
- Ensure confidential access to sexual, reproductive and HIV-related healthcare as well as full consent from patients at all times;<sup>55</sup>
- Address women's, girls' and LGBTI persons' increased health risk through preventative measures, including early detection and treatment of COVID-19;<sup>56</sup>
- Provide female health workers and other frontline workers with an adequate supply of personal protective equipment and appropriate psychological support;<sup>57</sup> and

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<sup>49</sup> "COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls."

<sup>50</sup> "COVID-19: A Gender Lens – Protecting sexual and reproductive health and rights, and promoting gender equality," *UNFPA*, March 2020, [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19\\_A\\_Gender\\_Lens\\_Guidance\\_Note.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_A_Gender_Lens_Guidance_Note.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> Lydia Namubiru, Khatondi Soita Wepukhulu, and Kerry Cullinan.

<sup>52</sup> "#Outlawed: The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name," *Human Rights Watch*, [http://internap.hrw.org/features/features/lgbt\\_laws/](http://internap.hrw.org/features/features/lgbt_laws/).

<sup>53</sup> "COVID-19: A Gender Lens."

<sup>54</sup> "Vulnerability Amplified."

<sup>55</sup> "Guidance Note on CEDAW and COVID-19."

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

- Guarantee easily accessible transportation services for women, girls and LGBTI persons living in rural areas to seek healthcare.

## Country-Specific Practices

### *Africa*

*Kenya:* Community health workers have found innovative ways to deliver drugs to HIV-registered patients, such as home deliveries by bike and multi-month refills.<sup>58</sup>

### *Latin America and the Caribbean*

*Honduras:* Employers are obliged to supply the materials and equipment necessary to carry out paid domestic work safely.<sup>59</sup>

## 5) Social and Economic Relief

The COVID-19 pandemic has destabilized most economies around the world, forcing people into unemployment and plunging many into poverty. Women and LGBTI persons are among the hardest hit because they are more likely to work in the informal sector and often have to survive without job protections. As a result, many of them must choose between risking infection to earn enough money for their families or adhering to lockdown requirements and therefore going without basic needs.<sup>60</sup>

The pandemic has upended both work and home life. Women carry an outsized share of the burden as schools shut down in many countries and children need to continue their learning at home. Among married couples who work full time, it is estimated that women provide close to 70% of child-care during standard working hours. Even the gradual reopening in some parts of the world will not solve the problem and could exacerbate it by forcing women out of the labor force or into part-time jobs. It could become a huge crisis because once a woman drops out of the labor force, the negative impact on her professional trajectory can last a lifetime.<sup>61</sup> If women cannot receive adequate support to balance their work and domestic duties, countries will not be able to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on Gender Equality by 2030.

The situation for LGBTI persons is also dire. Many already face daily discrimination in the workplace and have been laid-off without unemployment benefits. For example, LGBTI individuals who work as sex workers are unable to receive support from social protection policies because sex work is still illegal in most places. Even in rare cases where sex workers are promised food aid, it may be used as a bait to force them to disclose their identity to the government.<sup>62</sup> It is a vital moment for legislative bodies to intervene and ensure that basic needs are provided for all individuals in their country.

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<sup>58</sup> Lydia Namubiru, Khatondi Soita Wepukhulu, and Kerry Cullinan.

<sup>59</sup> « CN aprueba medidas de prevención y protección para la mujer en confinamiento por COVID-19 ».

<sup>60</sup> “Vulnerability Amplified.”

<sup>61</sup> Patricia Cohen and Tiffany Hsu, “Pandemic Could Scar A Generation of Working Mothers,” *New York Times*, June 3, 2020, [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/business/economy/coronavirus-working-women.html?campaign\\_id=9&emc=edit\\_nn\\_20200605&instance\\_id=19111&nl=the-morning&regi\\_id=92457363&segment\\_id=30155&te=1&user\\_id=391aa524f153fbd4a35b6226143f4039](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/business/economy/coronavirus-working-women.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20200605&instance_id=19111&nl=the-morning&regi_id=92457363&segment_id=30155&te=1&user_id=391aa524f153fbd4a35b6226143f4039).

<sup>62</sup> Lydia Namubiru, Khatondi Soita Wepukhulu, and Kerry Cullinan.



To facilitate economic recovery and guarantee social and economic relief programs for all, especially women, girls and LGBTI persons, parliamentarians are advised to call on their countries' relevant Ministries to, and provide oversight on policies that:

- Urgently address food shortages in vulnerable communities;<sup>63</sup>
- Grant cash transfers and provide alternative temporary employment, such as jobs in manufacturing personal protection equipment, for women and LGBTI persons;<sup>64</sup>
- Provide social protection schemes for women and LGBTI persons who are working in or laid-off from the informal economy;<sup>65</sup>
- Create information campaigns to promote co-responsibility of child-care in the household;<sup>66</sup>
- Invest in child care services and progressively offer more coverage in essential services;<sup>67</sup>
- Consider affirmative action measures for women and LGBTI persons during the economic recovery period,<sup>68</sup> and
- Formulate post-pandemic programs and targets for the economic empowerment of women and LGBTI persons.<sup>69</sup>

## Country-Specific Practices

### *Asia*

*India:* Cash grants are provided for women who have a particular type of bank account.<sup>70</sup>

*The Philippines:* Three local governments included same-sex partners with children in a social improvement program for families. Similar families who were ineligible for the program also received help through cash aid.<sup>71</sup>

### *Latin America and the Caribbean*

*Argentina:* The government has established a 1% quota for transgender workers in civil service jobs.<sup>72</sup>

*Brazil:* Congress has approved a 3-month concession of R\$ 600 (US\$ 120) to each informal worker and R\$ 1,200 (US\$ 240) to women-headed single parent households.<sup>73</sup> Single mothers and teenage mothers who are eligible to receive a cash grant for low-income households will automatically receive two payments.<sup>74</sup>

### *Middle East*

*Turkey:* There are increased social and maternity benefits, conditional on labor laws, for women.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> "Vulnerability Amplified."

<sup>64</sup> "COVID-19 in Women's Lives."

<sup>65</sup> "Guidance Note on CEDAW and COVID-19."

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> "Where Are the Women?"

<sup>71</sup> Victor Madrigal-Borloz et al.

<sup>72</sup> "Argentina establishes 1% quota for trans workers in civil service jobs," *Buenos Aires Times*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.batimes.com.ar/news/argentina/argentina-establishes-1-quota-for-trans-workers-in-civil-service-jobs.phtml>.

<sup>73</sup> "Accountability and COVID-19: a guidance note on parliamentary engagement," *UNDP*, July 2020.

<sup>74</sup> "Where Are the Women?"

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

## ***North America***

***Canada:*** The government has announced an additional \$15 million to support female entrepreneurs through the Women Entrepreneurship Strategy (WES) Ecosystem Fund.<sup>76</sup>

***United States:*** The government has issued grants to women's business centers for education, training and advising.<sup>77</sup> In Hawaii, the State's Commission on the Status of Women launched a Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for COVID-19, which aims to help women recover from the economic fallout caused by the pandemic and to change the way in which women's work is valued and compensated.<sup>78</sup>

## **6) Continuing Education in Remote Settings**

Due to lockdown and school closure measures, the COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption in the world's education systems in history, affecting almost 1.6 billion children and youth globally.<sup>79</sup>

LGBTI youth are among the ones most affected by the closure of campuses and other in-person meeting places as they have lost an important source of peer-based community. Especially for those who face discrimination at home, school is likely their only safe space where they can freely express their identities and receive support from friends and mentors.<sup>80</sup> The loss of this support system poses a great challenge to the mental health of many LGBTI youth and hinders their abilities to learn and grow.

It is also important to note that 743 million girls have already missed out on their education, and 10 million secondary school-aged girls are predicted to be out of school before the pandemic is over.<sup>81</sup> One major challenge to girls' education is lack of access to online and distance learning tools. Research shows that only 12% of households in the poorest countries have Internet access at home, and in general, access to mobile Internet is 26% lower for women and girls than their male counterparts.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, as many families are struggling financially due to the slowdown in the global economy, girls are much more likely to be burdened with the responsibilities of doing housework and caring for their younger siblings, resulting in less time dedicated to learning.<sup>83</sup>

For many girls, this interruption in their education can greatly impact other aspects of their life since lack of education is closely linked with child, early and forced marriage. It is estimated that girls without education are three times more likely to marry by the age of 18 than girls with secondary or higher education.<sup>84</sup> In many cases, girls are discouraged from pursuing learning, either because schools are inaccessible or

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<sup>76</sup> "Minister Ng announces more support for women entrepreneurs in the tech sector in southern Ontario," *Cision*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/minister-ng-announces-more-support-for-women-entrepreneurs-in-the-tech-sector-in-southern-ontario-857283666.html>.

<sup>77</sup> "Where Are the Women?"

<sup>78</sup> "Accountability and COVID-19."

<sup>79</sup> "Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond," *UN*, August 2020, [https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg\\_policy\\_brief\\_covid-19\\_and\\_education\\_august\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf).

<sup>80</sup> Christopher Spata, "Coronavirus Isolated LGBTQ Students From Community. Now They're Going Back to School," *PBS*, August 17, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/coronavirus-isolated-lgbtq-students-from-community-now-theyre-going-back-to-school/>.

<sup>81</sup> "What's Happening to Girls' Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic?" *Girls Not Brides*, July 10, 2020, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/educating-girls-during-covid-19/>.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> "Education," *Girls Not Brides*, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/themes/education/>.

expensive, or because parents do not perceive value in education but instead consider marriage as the best option for their daughters.<sup>85</sup>

### *Ending Child, Early and Forced Marriage*

The world is witnessing a drastic surge in cases of child marriage as the COVID-19 pandemic disrupts planned efforts to end this harmful practice. As a result, 13 million child marriages are expected to take place in the next decade that otherwise would not have occurred, largely undoing efforts to achieve SDG 5 on Gender Equality by 2030.<sup>86</sup>

However, while lack of education certainly increases girls' risk of being married off early, it is not the only reason. Other root causes of child marriage include gender inequality, poverty, insecurity and lack of economic and social opportunities for girls.<sup>87</sup> Many of these complex factors are also exacerbated in emergency settings as family and community structures break down during crises. A pandemic of this nature presents unique challenges that require action to protect adolescent girls from violence and exploitation, both in the response and recovery phases. Critical interventions that prioritize gender-responsive education plans, along with economic incentives and other social protection measures, will ensure that adolescent girls are not left behind, and that they receive the education they deserve.<sup>88</sup>

To ensure vulnerable youth have access to education in remote settings and promote gender equality by addressing the surge in child marriage cases, parliamentarians are advised to:

- Raise awareness around the importance of education, especially for girls and LGBTI youth;<sup>89</sup>
- Advocate for the necessary legal, cultural and technical support to allow pregnant girls, married girls, young mothers and vulnerable LGBTI youth to continue their education;<sup>90</sup>
- Monitor the effective reach and use of distance learning modalities in order to improve the curriculum and prepare for the gradual reopening of schools;<sup>91</sup>
- Provide psychosocial support and remote learning tools, such as internet connectivity and radio broadcasts, for marginalized youth;<sup>92</sup>
- Offer technical skills training and/or alternative education for those who drop out of school or are unable to pursue formal education due to other reasons;<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> "Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage," *UNFPA*, April 27, 2020, [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19\\_impact\\_brief\\_for\\_UNFPA\\_24\\_April\\_2020\\_1.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_impact_brief_for_UNFPA_24_April_2020_1.pdf).

<sup>87</sup> "Education," *Girls Not Brides*.

<sup>88</sup> "Joint Letter to the African Union: The Impact of COVID-19 on Girls' Education and Child Marriage," *Girls Not Brides*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/joint-letter-to-the-african-union-the-impact-of-covid-19/>.

<sup>89</sup> Robert Jenkins and Rebecca Winthrop, "5 actions to help bring the most marginalized girls back to school after COVID-19," *Brookings*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2020/05/15/5-actions-to-help-bring-the-most-marginalized-girls-back-to-school-after-covid-19/>.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> "Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19."

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

- Provide training for teachers and other educational workers to ensure that they know how to support students' distance learning and have the knowledge and skills needed to recognize and prevent risks of child marriage, adolescent pregnancy and mental health crisis;<sup>94</sup>
- Lift financial barriers that prevent vulnerable youth from going to school and that are likely to increase as a result of COVID-19 economic impacts;<sup>95</sup> and
- Integrate comprehensive sexual education, including information on sexual and reproductive health and relevant services, into the distance learning curriculum.<sup>96</sup>

## Country-Specific Practices

### *Africa*

Benin: Four kings and 556 religious leaders made commitments against child marriage practices.<sup>97</sup>

Côte d'Ivoire: The government launched a nation-wide distance learning program where teachers, mothers' groups, community health workers and leaders can track how the pandemic is affecting students and families and offer insights on how to prevent child marriage, early pregnancy and other threats.<sup>98</sup>

Malawi: Special skills training is provided for those who drop out of school and get pregnant.<sup>99</sup>

Zambia: The government gave scholarships to girls so that they can continue their education and avoid being married off early. More than a thousand girls have benefitted from this initiative this year. Schools also provided educational programs on TV, radio and other platforms to make distance learning more accessible.<sup>100</sup>

Zimbabwe: President Emmerson Mnangagwa signed legislation under amendments to the Education Act that officially prohibits state schools from banning pregnant students from attending. The amendments also allow students to continue going to school even if they owe fees.<sup>101</sup>

### *Asia*

Vietnam: The government is working with UNICEF to better understand the gender differences in access and learning quality of distance education so that the pandemic can become an opportunity to improve the gender-responsiveness of remote education at scale.<sup>102</sup>

### *Middle East*

Jordan: The government has implemented a set of policies to provide girls with psychosocial support through the education system, and teachers with professional development training in life skills education and effective ways to support victims of violence.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> "COVID-19 and Child, Early and Forced Marriage: An Agenda for Action," *Girls Not Brides*, April 6, 2020, <https://beta.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/resource-centre/covid-19-and-child-early-and-forced-marriage-an-agenda-for-action/>.

<sup>95</sup> Jenkins and Winthrop, "5 actions."

<sup>96</sup> "COVID-19 and Child, Early and Forced Marriage."

<sup>97</sup> High Level Political Forum 2020.

<sup>98</sup> Jenkins and Winthrop, "5 actions."

<sup>99</sup> UN General Assembly High-Level Side Event: Child, Early and Forced Marriage and the COVID-19 Pandemic, September 18, 2020.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Leah Rodriguez, "Zimbabwe Officially Allows Pregnant Girls to Stay in School," *Global Citizen*, August 24, 2020, <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/zimbabwe-pregnant-girls-stay-in-schools/>.

<sup>102</sup> Jenkins and Winthrop, "5 actions."

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

## 7) An Intersectional Approach to Support Groups at Higher Risk

It is important to keep in mind that there are many communities who suffer not only from the disproportionate gendered impact of the pandemic but also from compounded factors, such as xenophobia, racism, age-induced health risks, disabilities and armed conflicts. For instance, women and LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees face increased violence and discrimination in refugee camps and detention centers where health and hygiene conditions are deteriorating. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, protests for racial justice have also appeared in many parts of the world as racist attitudes are exacerbated and further suppress communities hit the hardest by the pandemic.

To prevent backsliding of gains made towards gender equality, it is essential to adequately address the intersectionality and multi-pronged approach of the gendered impact of COVID-19.

To adopt an intersectional approach to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and include groups at higher risk in policy considerations, parliamentarians are advised to allocate sufficient funds for and call on their countries' relevant Ministries to:

- Provide convenient healthcare and mental health support for older women and LGBTI persons through medical home visits, safe transport to healthcare facilities and psycho-social counselling;<sup>104</sup>
- Ensure that basic services, including healthcare and remote education, remain accessible for women, girls and LGBTI persons with disabilities during times of confinement and reduced service delivery;<sup>105</sup>
- Protect refugees who are women, girls and LGBTI through special measures such as systematic screening for COVID-19 and prevention from trafficking and survival sex;<sup>106</sup>
- Ensure that indigenous women, girls and LGBTI persons have access to culturally acceptable medicine, continuous education and COVID-19 information in native languages;<sup>107</sup>
- Consider alternatives to detention for women, girls and LGBTI persons deprived of liberty, especially for those detained on grounds of administrative or other non-severe offences;<sup>108</sup> and
- Adopt a rights-based approach to protect women, girls and LGBTI persons in humanitarian settings and conflict situations.<sup>109</sup>

### Country-Specific Practices

#### *Europe*

*Italy:* To address the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Italian government approved a €55 billion stimulus package, which includes funding to give undocumented migrants more opportunities to work legally in the country.<sup>110</sup>

*The Netherlands:* There is support for LGBTI migrants and refugees through events at youth centers.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> “Guidance Note on CEDAW and COVID-19.”

<sup>105</sup> “Guidance Note on CEDAW and COVID-19.”

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> “Q&A: Progress for Migrant Workers in Italy,” *Open Society Foundations*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/q-and-a-progress-for-migrant-workers-in-italy>.

<sup>111</sup> UN LGBTI Core Group UN General Assembly High-Level Event, September 24, 2020.

## ***Middle East***

Jordan: To reach the 700 children with disabilities enrolled in Azraq and Za’atari refugee camps, leaders innovatively used transparent masks in these children’s learning so that deaf children can still lip read.<sup>112</sup>

Lebanon: International LGBTI organizations and expatriate LGBTI Lebanese people have raised thousands of dollars to help Beirut’s LGBTI community which was affected by the explosion at the city’s port in August 2020.<sup>113</sup>

## **Conclusion**

With the COVID-19 pandemic disrupting global development plans and undoing years of efforts on progress and inclusion, parliamentarians now have a more important role than ever in legislating and scrutinizing governments’ policies and budgets to prevent the exacerbation of inequalities and ensure that those marginalized are not disadvantaged further and left behind. Furthermore, they should act as role models and leaders for their communities and legitimize attitudes and behaviors that could, in turn, inspire others to follow suit. Though this is certainly a challenging moment in human history, it is also an opportunity to “build back better” through undertaking gender-sensitive parliamentary action that is inclusive of all, including women and girls and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) people.

While preparing this brief, we encountered a lack of information on initiatives and policies taken by decision-makers to mitigate the negative impact of the crisis on LGBTI populations who have instead relied, to a large extent, on community-based services. Efforts should be made to bring the needs of LGBTI persons to the national agenda and to collect data by coordinating with local organizations and activists. Insofar as decision-makers lack this initiative and data to drive public policies, LGBTI people will remain unheard and not fully reflected in local and national development and crises-response plans.

Similarly, there is also a lack of health-related initiatives to address the needs of women and LGBTI persons because healthcare resources have been diverted to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, many women and LGBTI people, especially those living in rural areas, find themselves without the necessary sexual and reproductive health support as well as prevention and/or treatment for other infectious diseases, such as HIV/AIDS. Parliament should recognize this deficit and enact all-inclusive COVID-19 response and recovery policies to avoid serious global health consequences in the long term.

Among the several resources consulted, we found the following two particularly useful to better understand the role of parliamentarians in encouraging action to protect and promote the human rights of all and addressing the seven gendered issues noted:

- [A primer for parliamentary action – Gender sensitive responses to COVID-19](#), by UN Women, enlists the following actions parliaments can take during the crisis:
  - Commit to a gender sensitive response;
  - Cultivate a gender sensitive environment in parliament during the crisis;
  - Prioritize women’s involvement in the parliamentary response;
  - Monitor and evaluate the gender sensitivity of the crisis response;
  - Share lessons with other parliaments.

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<sup>112</sup> “Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19.”

<sup>113</sup> Heather Cassell, “LGBTQ groups respond with aid for Beirut’s queer community,” *Bay Area Reporter*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.ebar.com/news/news/296256>.

- [ASPIRE Guidelines](#), prepared by the Office of the United Nations Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), recommend the following:
  - Acknowledge LGBTI people and gender non-conforming people are everywhere;
  - Support the work of LGBTI organizations and human rights defenders;
  - Protect LGBTI people from violence and discrimination in the context of the pandemic;
  - Take into account that indirect discrimination is a real and significant risk (stigmatization should be prevented);
  - Have LGBTI persons represented in the design, implementation and evaluation of COVID-19 specific measures;
  - Collect evidence and data concerning the impact of COVID-19 on LGBTI people and follow best practices.

Lastly, it is crucial to emphasize that since the seven gendered issues addressed in this report are all inter-related in one way or another, it would take a comprehensive policy effort, targeting at least more than one of the issues at once, to make a real, lasting impact and truly protect the marginalized members of our society. In particular, consulting with civil society organizations and having the voices of women, girls and LGBTI persons represented in the decision-making process are always an essential starting point and would provide much guidance for parliamentarians along the way. Adopting a rights-based, gendered and intersectional approach also implies incorporating principles of indivisibility and interdependence of rights.

## **Resources**

To assist you in your legislative functions, PGA has compiled a **Resource Hub for Parliamentarians on the Impact of COVID-19 on Democracy and Human Rights** available at: <https://www.pgaction.org/drhr/covid-19.html>

PGA is a non-governmental, multi-party, international network of legislators acting in their individual capacity that informs and mobilizes parliamentarians in all regions of the world to advocate for human rights and the Rule of Law, democracy, human security, inclusion and gender equality. PGA's [Gender, Equality and Inclusion \(GEI\) Program](#) focuses on connecting, inspiring and empowering parliamentarians around the world to fully protect and actively uphold and promote the human rights of girls, women and LGBTI persons. The GEI Program advances these objectives through its two core campaigns: the [Campaign to End Child, Early and Forced Marriage \(CEFM\)](#) and the [Campaign Against Discrimination based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity \(SOGI\)](#).

PGA's Global Parliamentary [Campaign to End Child, Early and Forced Marriage \(CEFM\)](#) seeks to support parliamentarians in their efforts to promote the human rights of women and girls. It aims to empower parliamentarians with evidence-based tools to establish ending CEFM as a priority in national agendas and build political support to create an enabling legal and policy framework under the guidance of SDG 5 on Gender Equality.

PGA's Global Parliamentary Campaign against Discrimination based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) seeks to mobilize parliamentarians as human rights champions, taking action to guarantee that every individual has equal value, lives with dignity and is able to achieve their highest potential free

from all forms of violence and discrimination, including on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC).

To learn more about the Gender, Equality and Inclusion Program and its Campaigns, or to share your country's experience and policies, please contact:

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