

A close-up photograph of a woman's face, partially obscured by a blue face mask. She is wearing a yellow headscarf with a white and orange patterned border. Her eyes are looking directly at the camera. The background is a solid light blue.

# **Standing Up to the Challenge: Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and the Pacific**

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# Standing Up to the Challenge: Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and the Pacific



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PHOTO: UN WOMEN/Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

# Introduction

UN Women's response to COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific began as soon as the first case was reported. Long experience, including in previous health crises, suggested that the gender dimensions would quickly come to the fore. It was not that more women would fall ill or die – in fact, it soon became apparent that more men would lose their lives to the virus. But women's vulnerability to the pandemic would be far greater in many other ways.

More job and income losses. Greater unpaid care work around homes. Rising threats to mental health. Rates of violence against women and girls that soared so high during lockdowns that they were described as a second pandemic.

Gender discrimination has propelled all of these issues and more, because it is baked into societies, economies and political systems. The pandemic has only made its degree and persistence more obvious, repeatedly demonstrating gender inequalities that undermine individuals and families, handicap crisis response and limit hopes for recovery.

Actions to reduce inequality and realize women's human rights cannot wait until later, but must take place now, as a matter of urgency, both to solve the current crisis and to "build back better". UN Women is a constant advocate for gender issues and gender-responsive solutions for women across Asia and the Pacific, recognizing that women are both bearing the brunt of crisis and on the front lines of responding to it.

This report presents some highlights from the first year of the pandemic. It traces what UN Women did to secure access to emergency hygiene and other supplies, sustain life-saving essential services for escalating cases of violence against women and girls, integrate gender into international and national crisis response strategies, and make women's economic empowerment, both in terms of paid and unpaid labour, a fulcrum for resilience and recovery. It must be mentioned that UN Women is not working alone, but the results achieved are possible thanks to partnerships with national and international actors, from grassroots feminist networks and community-based organisations, to ministries and national departments to research institutions and academia to national and international non-governmental organizations and UN agencies.

One of the most important contributions UN Women made early on, setting the stage for much that would follow, was the publication of the world's first comprehensive report on the gender impacts of COVID-19, "Unlocking

the Lockdown: The Gendered Effects of COVID-19 on Achieving the SDGs in Asia and the Pacific." The report built on rapid assessments in 11 countries that UN Women initiated within a week of the declaration of the pandemic. The assessments captured specific differences between women and men as the crisis unfolded.

"Unlocking the Lockdown" eliminated a longstanding blind spot – the dearth of sound evidence on gender for shaping international and national crisis responses. In diverse countries, its findings have become the basis for directing relief supplies, keeping women's crisis shelters open as essential services, supporting women's small businesses, and targeting social protection schemes first to those experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of vulnerability, such as from gender, race and age.

Beyond helping countries and the international community define the issues women face, UN Women has also been well placed to act on these issues given its sustained efforts to achieve gender equality, and women's empowerment and resilience. Existing programmes, in many cases, eased the shift into an emergency response, providing women and girls with a foundation to call for action on their pandemic-related needs, sustain social cohesion in their communities or use skills to refashion their livelihoods.

UN Women's longstanding engagement in the region also helped ensure that it could bring neglected issues to the top of regional and national agendas, including women's overlooked and disproportionate burden of unpaid care work. Through new and existing partnerships with the private sector, a record number of companies have agreed to integrate gender equality principles in their operations moving forward. These collaborations have also spurred innovations in gender data collection that use technology to overcome hurdles imposed by lockdown measures.

Through years of experience, UN Women has seen much of what women and girls need to respond to and recover from a crisis. It has repeatedly witnessed how outcomes for communities and nations follow outcomes for women and girls, because so much depends on gender equality and women's empowerment. The challenge now is to further develop and scale up what has proven effective. If COVID-19 has shown the value of being adaptable and prepared, the lessons learned need to be fully applied to cope with the impending climate crisis. Women and girls cannot wait, and neither can their region nor the world.

**FIGURE 1:**  
**Highlights of UN Women's engagement in the response to date**

**1. CHINA:** Partnered with the Mulan Club, one of China's influential associations of women entrepreneurs to orchestrate social media and outreach campaigns to mobilize companies to respond to COVID-19 in line with the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs). Within the first few weeks of epidemic in China, funded by the Rockcheck Puji Foundation, China office has adopted a two-year project "Supporting Women to Recover from Socio-economic Impacts of COVID-19" to support women-owned small and medium sized enterprises building future resilience and promoting women's role and leadership in Hubei province and Tianjin.

**2. MYANMAR:** Engendered the COVID-19 Government response through technical assistance and coordination support to Government and women's rights organizations and networks. Coordinating support to female returning migrants, including cash for work, strengthening referral mechanisms to survivors of violence against women and girls, conducting anti-discrimination and anti-stigma information campaigns and extending psychosocial support to female migrants.

**3. VIET NAM:** Extended small cash grants to 3,500 impoverished people in Tran Van Thoi district hit by COVID-19 and a protracted drought, in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

**4. INDONESIA:** Assisted the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection to develop and implement a human rights-based and survivor-centred protocol for systematically handling cases of gender-based violence (GBV) and the trafficking of women migrant workers during the pandemic.

**5. THAILAND:** Provided policy recommendations on a stimulus package, advanced through a partnership between the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNICEF to develop protection schemes to assist at least 12 million vulnerable individuals, particularly women in the informal sector.

**6. AFGHANISTAN:** Developed guidelines, in partnership with UN partners and national health officials, for women's shelters to operate safely across the nation.

**7. PAKISTAN:** Addressed gender dimensions of humanitarian work, in collaboration with the National Disaster Management Agency, to advance women's participation and leadership in disaster risk reduction and to launch campaigns against gender norms that increase women's vulnerabilities during the pandemic.

**8. NEPAL:** Established a gender equality and social inclusion checklist for mandatory isolation facilities, together with the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens, which became a tool to monitor standards of safety and dignity, and the availability of essential services for women, girls, children, people with disabilities, and LGBTQI people, and guidance in screening for risks of GBV as cases surged under lockdowns. Supported 3,000 women and excluded groups in seven districts across four provinces of Nepal with comprehensive relief package with cash and in-kind assistance.

**9. BANGLADESH:** Supported 800 most vulnerable women of two districts, who were affected by both COVID-19 and the recent cyclone Amphan and floods, with cash-based assistance transferred via mobile phones, as well as awareness raising messages to provide essential public health information to keep them safe during the pandemic. Engaged with both Rohingya women in Cox's Bazar refugee camps and women in host communities in mask production activities, and community outreach and communication on COVID-19 prevention. Continues to provide dignity kits, critical GBV, sexual reproductive and health rights (SRHR) and other life-saving services in Multi-Purpose Women Centres and through women police helpdesks to Rohingya community, as well as support widows, LGBTQI and female sex workers impacted by the pandemic.

**10. PAPUA NEW GUINEA:** Implemented awareness programmes for a core group of 20 members of women market vendor's association in Koki Market and equipped them to educate other market vendors and customers on avoiding infection.

**11. PHILIPPINES:** Hosted working session with the national House of Representatives Committee on Women and Gender Equality and the Philippine Commission on Women to define legislative priorities for the 18th Congress as it deals with the pandemic. Issues raised have informed the revision of the long-term Philippine Development Plan and the COVID-19 Recovery Plan.

**12. TIMOR-LESTE:** Brought in diverse women's networks, together with support from the ILO, to monitor the government Monetary Support Programme to ensure it would cover women most in need, and systematically reached to more than 400 most vulnerable individuals.

**13. FIJI:** Worked closely with the Fiji Ministry of Women, Children, and Poverty Alleviation to convene government representatives, international and national NGOs, donors and UN entities to share experiences early in the pandemic with gender-responsive approaches to issues such as disseminating health and safety information and extending psychosocial support. Insights gained are being used to bolster the response to COVID-19 and prepare for the next cyclone season.

## COVID-19 AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: NOW WE KNOW

COVID-19, much like most other crises, has increased the risk of violence against women and girls (VAWG). Disruptions of support services for victims, living under mobility restrictions, increased unemployment rates, and economic insecurity resulting from the pandemic, all create heightened risks, especially if victims are confined at home with their abusers. Ad-hoc reports and warnings from service providers have long highlighted that VAWG might have been on the rise since the onset of COVID-19, but little data has been available to demonstrate this to date, as risk of infection halted face-to-face survey operations and other data production activities.

To gather insights on VAWG trends, UN Women partnered with UNFPA, Quilt.ai and ILO to conduct big data analysis on this topic, which examined people's search behavior in social media platforms and search engines in eight countries. Key findings include:

- **VAWG rose:** This is strongly manifested online, as search queries related to VAWG, including physical, sexual and psychological violence, all rose during the period considered (October 2019-September 2020). For example, searches related to physical violence (which include keywords such as “physical abuse signs”, “violent relationships”, and “cover bruises on face”) in **Malaysia**, **Philippines**, and **Nepal**, grew by 47 per cent, 63 per cent, and 55 per cent, respectively.
- **Online misogyny also increased:** Instances of trolling, using images without consent or sexual harassment online also increased since the onset of the crisis. In **Thailand**, online misogyny rose by 22,384 per cent, in the **Philippines**, by 953 per cent.

- **Violence against vulnerable groups drew scattered attention:** In **Nepal**, cases of sexual violence against Dalit women made the headlines while in the **Philippines**, there was increased discourse against rises in abuse of overseas domestic workers. In other countries, attention to vulnerable groups, such as migrants and LGBTQI people, remains low in the online discourse.
- **Help-seeking searches increased:** Malaysia had the highest increase (70%) followed by **Nepal** (47%), **Thailand** (29%), and **Singapore** (29%).

Not everyone found the information they needed: Local support services do not always come up in searches. In some countries, such as the Philippines, top search results lead to relevant local services and information, while in others, such as Indonesia the top results are foreign. In addition, service providers do not always achieve high levels of engagement in social media, and often fail to share key contact information for survivors.

The crisis, overall, has highlighted the potential of online technologies to both compile and search VAWG related information. However, much remains to be done in terms of leveraging this potential, from furthering the use of big data for gaining key insights, to promoting online engagement strategies for service providers and digital literacy across the board. To retrieve data and further details, please visit: <https://data.unwomen.org/>.





PHOTO: UN WOMEN/Louie Pacardo

Early days:  
health first

# EARLY DAYS: HEALTH FIRST

COVID-19 began as a health crisis, although it soon became much more, spiralling into every area of life. In the early days of the pandemic, UN Women backed immediate actions specifically geared towards safeguarding the health and lives of women and girls, including establishing gender-responsive measures in quarantine centres and securing access to protective equipment and information.

Quarantine centres were one early priority as millions of migrant workers, including many women, began streaming back to their home countries. In **Nepal**, UN Women joined the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens to establish a gender equality and social inclusion checklist for mandatory isolation facilities. It became a tool to monitor standards of safety and dignity, and the availability of essential services for women, girls, children, people with disabilities, LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex) people, and other vulnerable and excluded groups. The checklist guided screening for risks of gender-based violence as cases surged under lockdowns.

The model for the checklist emerged from a UN Women partnership with UNICEF and the Government of **Viet Nam**, which applied a similar approach in 392 quarantine centres across that country. It included instructions on safe living and proper hygiene, nutritional intake, measures to prevent violence and sexual abuse, and resources for psychological counselling. Similar initiatives took place in **Cambodia, Myanmar, Pakistan and Timor-Leste**

In **Papua New Guinea**, UN Women collaborated with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Ministry of Health to train health workers in quarantine centres on a code of conduct respectful of human rights and dignity. People returning from abroad were greeted in the centres with a UN Women-sponsored booklet outlining their rights in quarantine and detailing information on services for gender-based violence. Training for health-care workers in **India** equipped 10,000 nurses in government and private hospitals with new skills for COVID-19 treatment.

Rapid assessments conducted by a women's rights organization in 10 districts of **Pakistan** informed UN Women's distribution of essential food items and hygiene supplies to home-based workers and other highly vulnerable women. In **Nepal**, as soon as it became apparent that there was a global shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), and the poorest countries could not compete for increasingly expensive supplies, UN Women engaged hundreds of women home-based workers to begin producing masks and channelling them into supply chains, with the added benefit of enabling women to sustain their livelihoods. In **Fiji**, the Salvation Army Fiji Family Care Centres in Suva, Lautoka and Labasa were able to continue to provide essential services safely to women and girls after UN Women funded, procured and distributed critical Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), ensuring the communities, specifically women and girls could continue to receive essential services in a COVID-19 safe manner. Similar efforts took place in **Myanmar** for women affected by conflict and returning migrant workers, who produced masks procured by government and humanitarian agencies. In the Rohingya refugee camps in **Bangladesh**, UN Women was the first to shift its livelihood support activities with refugee women so they could begin producing reusable masks and sanitary napkins. UN Women also provided technical advice to other humanitarian organizations so that they could do the same.

UN Women mobilized behind the earliest assessments of the consequences of the pandemic for women and girls, generating evidence to make responses more targeted and effective. In April, rapid assessments of women market vendors in Port Moresby, **Papua New Guinea** found a low level of understanding of COVID-19, even as they played essential yet risky public roles in sustaining food supplies. Awareness programmes for a core group of 20 members of the vendor's association in Koki Market equipped them to educate other market vendors and even customers on avoiding infection; the effort was subsequently scaled up to six Port Moresby markets. In Morobe Province, the most



populated part of the country, UN Women partnered with the provincial COVID-19 Emergency Committee, Health Authority and the Lae Safe City Network of Women to set up information sessions for women's groups, youth, schools, NGOs and faith-based organizations. Participants were taught how to share what they learned with their peers and communities.

In **Fiji, Solomon Islands** and **Vanuatu**, early concerted efforts by UN Women ensured women market vendors were able to continue vending at the markets whilst maintaining social distancing and keeping safe. A tool was developed and disseminated to provide guidance to local governments on their planning processes for COVID-19 in municipal markets. The rapid planning tool has been used by 14 municipal councils for Fiji and several in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to develop COVID-19 response plans for market vendors and the municipalities. This tool is now being turned into a guidance note for other markets internationally.

UN Women conducted rapid assessments in the early days of COVID-19 across 21 municipal markets in **Fiji, Solomon Islands** and **Vanuatu**. The assessments revealed that vendors' ability to go to the market was greatly affected, particularly by restrictions put in place to encourage social distancing. Of those who continued to vend, 44.67 per cent of vendors worked the same hours and days, 36 per cent reduced the number of days they were in the market and 19.33 per cent reduced both the number of days and hours they spent at the market. In **Fiji**, UN Women worked together with UNICEF to distribute additional WASH supplies for women market vendors and municipal councils to ensure the women vendors had access to sanitation and health supplies at the markets and the municipal councils were able to keep the market environment clean and sanitized. UN Women procured and distributed temporary tents to markets across **Fiji** to promote social distancing and also safely manage the influx of new market vendors who resorted to market vending as a means of alternative livelihood due to massive job losses experienced in the tourism industry.

UN Women skilfully deployed the tools of information and advocacy in diverse countries, based on its longstanding presence and knowledge of local concerns. A series of short but information-rich "gender alerts" in **Afghanistan**, for example, helped keep gender issues at the top of international and national response agendas. Among other issues, the alerts stressed that already scarce resources were flowing into COVID-19 at the expense of services for survivors of violence against women and girls.

UN Women has maintained a steady drumbeat of advocacy for actions in **Afghanistan** to close gender gaps, including to provide separate spaces for women in all health-care facilities, ensure that PPE distribution includes civil society organizations, and secure agreement from the Ministry of Public Health that in every COVID-19 centres in every province, a room will be dedicated as a quarantine space for survivors of violence against women, which may reach women who cannot access health services. To broaden access to information, while also highlighting women's leadership, UN Women kicked off the creative Salam for Safety campaign. It featured images of women asking Afghans to use the traditional "salam" greeting with a hand on the chest rather than making physical contact. It inspired a broader regional campaign for "safe greetings", all with traditional hand gestures encouraging social distancing.

Early efforts of UN Women in the Pacific on COVID-19 awareness saw the printing and distribution of WHO COVID-19 awareness communication materials to all 15 municipal markets across **Fiji** in coordination with the Ministry for Local Government, Housing and Community Development, municipal councils and women market vendors. Short videos demonstrating alternative greetings



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/Iliesa Ravucl

options ie. 'joining palms and saying 'Namaste' as opposed to a hand shake', hand washing demonstrations were also produced with women market vendors and uploaded on various social media platforms to provide a localised touch. The public announcements systems provided by UN Women at the municipal markets were also utilised to relay COVID-19 awareness and health and hygiene messages to market vendors and the general public frequenting the municipal markets.

For International Women's Day on 8 March, UN Women in **China** kicked off a mass social media campaign, #AMessagetoHer, to highlight women's contributions to the COVID-19 response and the need to address women's concerns going forward. Reaching up to 56 million views, the campaign highlighted the many women who stepped forward as medical workers and volunteers, including a cadre of women farmers previously trained by UN Women on leadership skills. With confidence and skills to break gender barriers that prevent women from taking on public roles, they were the first to rally their neighbours to apply social distancing standards and check temperatures among people moving in and out of their villages.

### **WOMEN SAFELY QUARANTINE WITH OTHER WOMEN**

*"Initially, we had 21 people in the quarantine centre, including men. [But] it became challenging to manage both men and women in the same quarantine centre, due to their different needs. So we asked the Government to [approve this as] a women-only quarantine centre with a female security team."*

— Lily Thapa, founder of Women for Human Rights, an organization in Nepal that offered office space in 21 districts as quarantine centres

*"We are all very happy to be here, as we feel safe. All the staff are female and that makes us feel comfortable."*

— Mithu Tamang, 30, a migrant stranded in Kuwait for more than two months before a chartered flight brought her back to Nepal, where she considered herself lucky to quarantine at a Women for Human Rights centre

### **A FEARLESS DETERMINATION TO CARE FOR PATIENTS**

*"Now I'm not afraid of seeing COVID-19 patients. I know that it's my job and if we don't do this, no one else will. I have a passion for my work knowing I can save their lives. But for emergency doctors, nurses and other staff, self-protection is very important as we are the first responders."*

*"I ask people to not be afraid of COVID-19, rather be prepared to fight it while observing precautions and keep praying that this ends sooner rather than later. Now with personal experience, I'm confident that I'll be in a better position to identify and care for COVID-19 patients and help them. I'll now be advocating for testing of every patient coming into the emergency department."*

— Farheen Sarwat, 49, a Senior Emergency Staff Nurse in Rawalpindi, Pakistan who has cared for COVID-19 patients since the beginning of the pandemic, and survived her own bout with the disease





PHOTO: UN WOMEN/Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

Rights always:  
escalating violence,  
scaled-up response

# RIGHTS ALWAYS: ESCALATING VIOLENCE, SCALED-UP RESPONSE

UN Women knew that COVID-19 would unleash not just one pandemic, but two – the first an infectious disease and the second skyrocketing violence against women and girls as lockdowns confined people at home. UN Women's rapid assessments alerted the region and individual countries to this alarming rise as soon as it began.

Women have a right to live free from violence, and whatever the circumstances, that right must be fulfilled. UN Women made it a priority to directly fund counselling and shelters for survivors of gender-based violence, and extend mobile and online services to surmount movement restrictions. Putting PPE in the hands of front-line responders helped sustain life-saving support. UN Women drew on newly developed guidance on gender-based violence in crisis situations as well as experiences from past crises to respond quickly and keep lifelines intact.

In five **Pacific island countries**, as lockdowns took effect, UN Women immediately surveyed crisis centres, confirming a major increase in calls to their helplines reporting gender-based violence. Working together with crisis centres and national women's machineries, funding was provided to support continued operations, and training helpline operators, health workers, and Red Cross volunteers to respond to gender-based violence. With remote service delivery a critical challenge in countries spread over many small outlying islands, UN Women and its partners used online technology such as Zoom and Facebook to connect. Partner organisations used similar technology to connect survivors to assistance and promoted helpline numbers through easily accessible infographics and SMS via mobile companies. Phone credits and free use of mobile hotspots eased access for women struggling to afford basic necessities.

In **Fiji, Tonga and Vanuatu**, a tropical cyclone hit at the same time, as countries were preparing for COVID-19, adding to the challenge. With support from UN Women, the **Vanuatu Women's Centre** quickly mobilised after the cyclone, and undertook socially distanced mobile counselling visits, making 30 physical visits to three areas – Malampa, Sanma and Pentecost.

UN Women, in partnership with ILO, focused on supporting women migrant workers who experienced violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, in both countries of origin and destination. In the countries of origin, UNW and partners focused on providing direct support to returnee women migrant workers who had to repatriate due to the loss of jobs, incomes and travel restrictions. In **Indonesia** and **Myanmar**, the programme supported quarantine centers for returnee women migrants by providing PPE kits with information materials on available helplines and services to be contacted in case of violence and by building the capacity of the staff on prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation. UN Women also supported shelters and hotlines for survivors in **Viet Nam** and **Indonesia** to ensure they could remain operational during the pandemic and could safely provide services. In countries of destination, the programme invested in strengthening helpline services for women migrant workers. In **Thailand** and **Malaysia**, UN Women supported major helpline services to provide quality services to all women, including women migrant workers and to refer cases to health facilities, police or legal support organizations.

As part of the support to hotlines, UNW organized the first webinar of a series of round tables on "Remote Service Provision for Women Migrant Workers: Global and Local Knowledge Sharing", providing a learning opportunity on promising practices in remote service provision especially during the COVID-19 pandemic where the importance of the remote service has been emphasized. Based on the outcome of the webinar series, a technical brief on "Technology based remote service provision" is being produced.

**Papua New Guinea's** national domestic violence helpline was swamped with triple the usual number of calls in May, June and July. As emergency restrictions eased, UN Women worked with shelters so they could operate fully and safely, and continue offering counselling, shelter, medical care, security, home visits and life skills training. A six-month supply of food and PPE sent to 13 shelters around the



country helped overcome shortages. When it became clear that transport for survivors to reach the shelters was an issue, UN Women developed vouchers for taxi drivers and mobilized ambulances for women requiring emergency assistance. Funding for the national domestic violence helpline ensured it could expand services and staffing to meet demand.

UN Women worked with United Nations partners and national health officials to develop guidelines for women's shelters to continue operating safely across **Afghanistan**. UN Women helped them access PPE and cleaning and disinfectant supplies, and created a tracking tool to monitor and effectively respond to COVID-19 cases within shelters.

Partnerships with provincial governments in **Pakistan** scaled up protections for women in crisis centres as well as workplaces. In Balochistan, new protocols defined essential services to be provided in all women's crisis centres across the province. Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa's provincial Office of the Ombudsperson for Protection against Harassment of Women in the Workplace launched a resource toolkit summarizing existing laws and redress mechanisms for gender-based violence, and providing tools for managing tense work environments in the midst of the pandemic. At a national level, UN Women restructured some existing programmes on ending violence against women to respond to the crisis, working with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to train police, developing guidelines on precautionary measures, and hosting webinars for policymakers on the gender impacts of COVID-19 and considerations for law enforcement.

In **Indonesia**, UN Women assisted the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection to develop and begin implementing a human rights-based and survivor-centred protocol for systematically handling cases of gender-based violence and the trafficking of women migrant workers during the pandemic. A similar effort is underway in **Viet Nam**.

In the **Philippines**, UN Women created a team of psychosocial support experts and social workers to link with a new task force of government and non-governmental institutions to scale up psychological first aid for survivors, working through front-line service providers, such as the police. UN Women supported women activists and advocates as they banded together to address the spike in online (and offline) exploitation of women and children. In May, the Bantay Bastos Group, a private Facebook Group created by Every Woman and the Young Feminists Collective to track and report posts that promote violence, sexism and rape culture on social media, reported 45 accounts to Facebook and five cases to the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Division of the Philippine National Police.



UN Women and UNFPA in **Cambodia** backed a simplification of referral pathways that connect survivors of gender-based violence to the spectrum of health, legal and other services they may require. A partnership with Child Helpline Cambodia enhanced training for hotline operators, including to respond to cases among women migrant workers. An app put information on referrals, risks of violence and safe migration in the hands of women migrants, and was designed to be accessible among migrants with low literacy.

UN Women worked closely with **Fiji, Kiribati and Solomon Islands** to update referral pathways and emergency phone tree in response to COVID-19 to ensure enhanced coordination and continued access to essential services for women and girls. For Solomon Islands, referral pathways for all its provinces were also updated. In addition, **Samoa** developed Community Response and Referral Guidelines, a set of basic guidelines for responding to cases of GBV and child welfare report during COVID-19.

A UN Women-supported initiative in **India** developed WhatsApp chat bots and apps to assist survivors, such as the *MyAmbar App*. It provides comprehensive information covering helpline numbers and service providers. UN Women joined UNFPA and the World Health Organization to help one-stop service centres, helplines and women's safety centres in five states learn to apply global standards for essential services as part of a strengthened response to violence against women and girls during COVID-19.

In **Bangladesh**, UN Women has guided multiple forms of outreach urging prevention. A network of 14 community radio stations broadcast regular public service announcements to an audience of 7 million people, while texts to a registry of nearly 17,000 imams made prevention

messages a feature of sermons in local mosques. Young women who won an innovation competition organized by UN Women in 2019 developed social media messages focused on domestic violence and safety for survivors, which reached more than 29,000 people. In Cox's Bazar, UN Women has engaged in community outreach through door-to-door visits and focused groups across 13 refugee camps, as well as provided psychosocial support through Multi-Purpose Women's Centre via referral ways.

With support from UN Women, **Tonga** and **Solomon Islands** also did public outreach via radio, as well as via social media. **Kiribati** produced over 20 different Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials with key messages, while **Fiji** promoted its national domestic violence helpline and child helpline via over 200,000 printed IEC materials, social media cards, and 27 radio and 18 television adverts in the three national languages, in partnership with the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. As aside from the COVID-19, Fiji faced two major cyclones during 2020, all IEC materials were used throughout the year. The reach of all IEC materials was wide as UN Women worked with national radio and television stations covering the whole of Fiji, as well as government and CSOs as dissemination partners.

Public services announcements broadcast widely through media in **Nepal** helped reach around 8.7 million people with timely and clear information about the pandemic and available services, including responses to gender-based violence.

With billions of people initially sheltering at home, and many women trapped with abusive partners, UN Women tapped into Twitter to make sure domestic violence survivors across Asia and the Pacific could get lifesaving information. If a Twitter user searched for terms like "abuse", "sexual assault" or "domestic violence", a notification in their language would flash across the screen, urging them to seek help if needed, followed by a hotline number and Twitter handle. The prompt is available in **India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam.**

### THE SHADOW PANDEMIC: HELPLINE CALLS SOAR BY 150 PER CENT

*"Families were fighting over the rationing of food; neighbours were stealing from each other's plantations; domestic violence was rife as couples were forced to stay in close proximity to each other during lockdown, and with the daily struggle for food and other necessities, stress and anger were the usual triggers of violence."*

—Silliniu Lina Chang, President of the Samoa Victim Support Group



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/Naw Su





PHOTO: UN WOMEN/Nadira Islam

Gearing up: putting women  
and gender at the centre of  
the pandemic response

# GEARING UP: PUTTING WOMEN AND GENDER AT THE CENTRE OF THE PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Every country in Asia and the Pacific has been compelled to take measures to contain the spread of the virus and manage the many related consequences, from job losses to food insecurity. Much has depended on having response plans and mechanisms in place to protect people from immediate harm, orchestrate different interventions and build a bridge to recovery.

To be effective, responses to the crisis must fully integrate gender into every aspect, through explicit strategies that uphold the rights of women and girls and meet their distinct needs. UN Women has been a leading regional champion for gender-responsive planning, both within the international and humanitarian communities, and through strong partnerships with national governments and civil society.

## Coordinating action

UN Women has brought together United Nations development and humanitarian partners as well as donors of international assistance to marshal broad support for gender-responsive measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has consistently ensured that women and girls engage with international actors to define priority resources and forms of assistance.

Even before the pandemic, UN Women managed the Gender Hub in the congested Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar in **Bangladesh**. The Hub provides expertise to keep gender at the forefront of humanitarian action. When the pandemic hit, it coordinated a rapid gender analysis and successfully advocated for all humanitarian actors to make gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls central to the COVID-19 prevention and response plan. With the Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group, the Hub mobilized a broad

consortium of humanitarian organizations to respond to concerns women in the camps articulated. For example, strict social norms dictated that women could not go to isolation and treatment centres used by men. This barrier increased the danger to women's lives, and could have led to serious outbreaks given crowded conditions in the camps. The centres were revamped accordingly to apply gender-responsive operating protocols and checklists.

The Gender Hub also worked with diverse humanitarian organizations to set up gender-responsive action plans related to health, education, water and sanitation, and nutrition and food security. Another significant step came when UN Women and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) signed the first agreement globally to guarantee gender-responsive management of the camps. Moving forward, all aspects of site management, capacity-building, monitoring and community engagement will require a central focus on gender equality and the participation and leadership of women and girls.

During the lockdown in the camps, UN Women sustained the delivery of critical services for women and girls through five Multi-Purpose Women's Centres. These continued offering sexual and reproductive health information, referrals and case management for gender-based violence, psychosocial counselling and information on COVID-19. Livelihood programmes shared seed packages for homestead gardens and offered training to help women start producing reusable masks.

Special police help desks for women and children also continued to function, managed by 10 trained women police officers, and offering 24/7 response services for gender-based violence cases. Six UN Women gender officers and 40 trained Rohingya women volunteers were seconded to leadership structures in 13 camps; they



systematically referred cases of gender-based violence, trafficking and sexual exploitation and abuse to protection services. They also routinely consulted with Rohingya women leaders and their networks, and then raised their issues and concerns with camp authorities and humanitarian actors. A new working group on gender-diverse populations was formed to promote the rights and inclusion of transgender people in the pandemic response. It is led by Bandhu, a local NGO that advocates the rights of LGBTQI people, with support from UN Women and UNHCR.

The United Nations country team in **Nepal** is developing a socioeconomic response framework to guide ongoing relief and recovery efforts, and UN Women took the helm of the Social Cohesion and Community Resilience pillar to ensure that it includes the perspectives of diverse and often marginalized people, including women, conflict survivors, sex workers, Madhesi women and LGBTQI people. Through the GiHA task team, which serves as a constructive virtual dialogue platform, honouring diversity of voices and enabling greater coherence for coordination for gender equality, UN Women convened more than 1,000 representatives of the Government, civil society organizations, development partners and United Nations agencies to hear the concerns of women and

excluded groups as part of informing their responses to the pandemic.

The framework provides an important opportunity to build back better on a foundation of inclusion and social consensus, and guides interventions by all United Nations organizations over 18 months. Key measures include stemming the loss of livelihoods, addressing discrimination and inequalities, and strengthening social cohesion. UN Women's quick action also ensured that gender equality and social inclusion standards feature across Nepal's humanitarian planning, including a COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan and a Monsoon Emergency Preparedness Plan. These strengthen access to timely information, services, resources and opportunities for vulnerable women and girls.

UN Women broadened the scope for gender responsiveness in **Afghanistan** by working with a team of international humanitarian organizations to revise the response plan; it now features substantial commitments to gender and social inclusion. In **Myanmar** and **Viet Nam**, UN Women supported the United Nations system in applying a gender equality marker to track gender responsiveness in pandemic-related programmes and funding proposals.



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

In Myanmar, UN Women provide technical guidance to ensure gendered actions and a gender-responsive UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19 in Myanmar, referred to as the UN-SERF, also the response and contribution to the Government of Myanmar's COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP). In recognition of this, the Government of Myanmar, through the Ministry of Planning, Finance and Industry, while acknowledging the gender gaps in its Country Economic Relief Plan, requested the assistance of UN Women Myanmar to further engender its COVID-19 responsive and monitoring frameworks. In collaboration with the Government of Australia and the Asian Development Bank in Viet Nam, UN Women drew together an advisory group that devised a country gender equality profile. It is intended to boost the visibility and strength of gender equality advocacy by international partners, including through the use of statistical data and qualitative analysis, and gender mainstreaming in United Nations strategies.

Research initiatives, highlighting the gendered impact of COVID-19 on women across the region were advanced by UN Women in all countries, in partnership with organizations such as CARE, UNICEF, UNFPA, International Rescue Committee and many others. In **Afghanistan**, UN Women partnered with the International Rescue Committee, civil society organizations, and a mobile network operator to conduct a Rapid Assessment Survey across Afghanistan. The survey is part of a regional project run by UN Women to understand the differential impact of the pandemic on individuals across the Asia Pacific region. Over 8,000 responses received in Afghanistan—the highest in the region.

For **Asia and the Pacific** as a whole, UN Women has steered the Issue-Based Coalition on Human Rights, Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, in creating an online repository of more than 200 resources for integrating human rights and gender in international assistance as well as national socioeconomic frameworks. In South-East Asia, UN Women worked with UNICEF and UNODC to develop communications materials explaining the role of law enforcement in protecting women and children during COVID-19. Translated into Burmese, Khmer, Lao, Thai and Vietnamese, the materials were widely disseminated through the UNODC Border Liaison Offices, a network of support for better border management in the subregion.

## MORE DIFFICULTIES FOR REFUGEES, BUT WOMEN STAND UP TO THE CHALLENGES

*"The pandemic has made life in the camps harder. Food prices have increased and there are shortages. [But] as a volunteer, I get the chance to attend meetings and trainings where I can enrich my knowledge and skills... and help protect my community from COVID-19. As I am working with UN Women, I have an official identity and dignity. My family and community respect me."*

— Nurussafa, a 25-year-old Rohingya woman volunteer in Camp 5 in Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh, who shares COVID-19 prevention information and links women and girls to women-friendly spaces

## SOLIDARITY SUSTAINS WOMEN IN A DOUBLE CRISIS

*"This is the time for us to have solidarity, to share strategies, to share our challenges, to share our concerns, and to support each other. We have to look after each other."*

— Shamima Ali, coordinator of Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, which in addition to services for survivors of domestic violence provided food, medicine and other essentials during the combined crisis of COVID-19 and a tropical cyclone



## FROM DISASTER TO DISEASE, READINESS IS ALL

COVID-19 has bolstered ongoing efforts in Asia and the Pacific to manage risks and be prepared for crises, whether they come from an enormous storm or a tiny virus. Even before the pandemic, UN Women had assisted countries in developing these capacities, and so they were prepared to face disease outbreaks that overlapped with natural disasters.

In the Pacific island countries, having faced a series of natural disasters over the years, crisis centres had experience in rapidly adapting coping strategies, with the added support of UN Women. The strategies enabled them to keep services going. This proved particularly critical when, in the midst of the pandemic in April, four countries were hit hard by Tropical Cyclone Harold.

In March in Fiji, the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre had already anticipated a greater need for their services and began gearing up accordingly. They promoted helpline numbers and successfully advocated to be declared as essential services that could keep operating. After the storm devastated parts of the country, they worked together to pool resources and keep counselling widely available, and they provided clients with food, medicine and other essentials that were not always available in evacuation centres. Similar efforts took place in Tonga and Vanuatu. These centres gave priority to not only client safety, but also staff safety, with strategic planning to work remotely.

UN Women also worked with the Fiji Ministry of Women, Children, and Poverty Alleviation to convene government representatives, international and national NGOs, donors and United Nations entities to share experiences early in the pandemic with gender-responsive approaches to issues such as disseminating health and safety information and extending psychosocial support. Insights gained are being used to bolster the response to COVID-19 and prepare for the next cyclone season. In addition, UN Women is part of the national Gender-Based Violence Working Group, under the Safety and Protection Cluster, led by the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, and UN Women and works in partnership with frontline service providers, who are signatories to the Fiji National Service Delivery Protocol for Responding to Cases of GBV, and other key stakeholders to address GBV. UN Women also co-leads the Safety and Protection Cluster with UNICEF. The Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation is the lead of the Safety and Protection Cluster, as well as the GBV Working Group.

In Papua New Guinea, UN Women co-chairs the protection cluster, a network of 20 organizations active on crisis response, with the government Community Development Department. By mapping the COVID-19 activities of all members, the cluster helped produce a national COVID-19 disaster management plan; UN Women worked to ensure gender issues featured throughout the plan. The cluster also created a code of conduct and agreed to integrate protections against sexual exploitation and abuse in all COVID-19 response plans, setting a precedent for future disaster relief and response strategies. UN Women provided emergency training on these issues to all protection cluster organizations and United Nations entities, and activated a task force of focal points within the United Nations country team.

The start of the pandemic coincided with another disaster in Bangladesh, the super cyclone Amphan. At the southern tip of the country, one of the worst affected areas, UN Women supported local women's groups and leaders as they swung into action, helping people to evacuate and providing accurate information. The groups supported 250 women, including widows, women with disabilities and women heads of households, to make almost 43,000 masks and protective gear. The women learned new skills and earned some income, all while practising social distancing and helping to protect their communities. The experience has made a powerful case for women's leadership and skills as front-line responders, and offers an example for future responses to crisis.

In Bangladesh, the 2020 monsoon floods were among the worst in 20 years. With the GiHA Working Group, UN Women conducted a rapid assessment showing that the flooding, a crisis in itself, had also aggravated the upward trend in gender-based violence due to the COVID-19 lockdowns. Widespread anxiety and insecurity were feeding the risk of violence. Up to 60 per cent of people reported psychological depression and trauma. These insights shaped the humanitarian response to put a consistent emphasis on meeting women's needs, especially the needs of women heads of households.

UN Women collaborates with the National Disaster Management Agency in Pakistan to address gender dimensions of humanitarian work in food security, logistics, health, nutrition, water and sanitation, and protection. The agency has agreed to advance women's participation and leadership in disaster risk reduction more broadly, in addition to the COVID-19 response, and to launch campaigns against gender norms that increase women's vulnerabilities to crisis.

## Giving leading national roles to women and gender

National governments across the region lead the response to the pandemic, and UN Women has worked closely with them, often drawing on longstanding and close ties with women leaders and national gender institutions. UN Women helped to integrate gender in response plans, strengthen the quality of plans through better data and training, and jump-start the process of defining priorities for women and girls in the longer-term recovery stage. **Nepal's** Supreme Court issued a landmark judgment prioritizing women's rights and the representation of women in planning, managing and monitoring the national COVID-19 response. The judgment recognized the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Checklist developed by UN Women and humanitarian partners for steering the response to COVID-19.

In **Papua New Guinea**, UN Women provided recommendations for key national and international actors on promoting women's leadership throughout the pandemic response, and supported the Autonomous Region of Bougainville in bringing women leaders into the COVID-19 task force. Partnerships with women politicians mobilized them to take part in radio broadcasts to raise awareness of gender-based violence, as well as to reach out to constituents to share information on the pandemic. An eight-week training programme helped gender focal points from governments across the region understand how to integrate gender in the COVID-19 response.

Engagement with national women's institutions in **Timor-Leste** helped them improve data to track violence against women. UN Women also ensured violence against women became a core issue in the joint United Nations socioeconomic impact assessment of the pandemic. Findings from the exercise were used to guide continued action under the National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence.

In **Fiji**, as a member of the COVID-19 Response Gender Working Group, UN Women provided guidance on a gender-responsive national recovery package with detailed plans to address gendered impacts in important economic sectors, such as agriculture and tourism, as well as in health care.

Through UN Women's collaboration with the national gender machinery in **Myanmar**, Women's Day in July was dedicated to the gendered impacts of COVID-19. Events to mark the day as well as extensive media coverage catalysed a national debate calling for women's leadership, and for the response and recovery efforts to put women at the centre. The Government acknowledged that gender-based

violence had increased and subsequently agreed to include gender training in the national pandemic response plan rolled out to state governments. It requested UN Women to develop gender-responsive results and monitoring frameworks for the national COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan.

In the **Philippines**, UN Women hosted a working session with the national House of Representatives Committee on Women and Gender Equality and the Philippine Commission on Women to define legislative priorities for the 18th Congress as it deals with the pandemic. Issues raised have informed the revision of the long-term Philippine Development Plan and the COVID-19 Recovery Plan.

A position paper issued with the Bangsamoro Women's Commission informed parliamentary debates in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao and drew attention to five core policies to mitigate the adverse impacts of the pandemic on women. The Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, launched in October, recognized added burdens from the pandemic on women living in conflict-affected areas. It emphasized the goal of eliminating all forms of violence against women, including violence caused by armed conflicts or linked to the pandemic.

In June, UN Women brought together ministers for gender equality or women's affairs from **Australia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, Myanmar** and the **Republic of Korea** to share country-level experiences and innovative practices in the COVID-19 response, and affirm the importance of incorporating gender perspectives. They were joined by senior government representatives from **Japan, the Philippines** and **Thailand**. This demonstrated broad commitment to gender equality as well as regional cooperation in making gender central to building back better.

## Mobilizing civil society

Across Asia and the Pacific, UN Women's deep-seated relationships with women's advocates and civil society organizations powered early advocacy to fully align COVID-19 responses with women's rights and needs. UN Women galvanized attention to gender issues as soon as they became apparent, mooted solutions to reach the most vulnerable groups of women and girls, and got the word out so that women could protect themselves and obtain needed support.

In **Timor-Leste**, amid mounting financial pressures on activist groups, UN Women drew on the EU-UN Spotlight



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/ Gunjan Jha

Initiative to expand funding for the national disability association so that it could sustain advocacy for women with disabilities. UN Women joined advocates for the rights of LGBTQI people in calling for an inclusive response to the crisis. A series of public messages highlighted their experiences, including their acute vulnerability to precarious employment and the risks of being shut at home with family members who do not accept them.

UN Women assisted three leading women's networks in **Nepal** to develop a common charter of demands articulating the most pressing needs of their constituents. The charter advocates that women and vulnerable and excluded groups must participate in designing pandemic responses, including at the local level. Among other demands, the charter calls for safer infrastructure and urged authorities to move from "building back better" to "building back differently". The charter was submitted to the heads of seven municipalities, four provinces and eight national government entities.

With UN Women's support, **Bangladesh's** Gender Monitoring Network of women-led and gender-focused civil society organizations released [a Call for Action](#) for women, gender-diverse people and other vulnerable groups most affected by the pandemic. Widely covered in national media, it presented 12 key measures for policymakers to uphold women's human rights during recovery and beyond. It built on the notion that vulnerabilities can intersect and magnify each other, and it emphasized that everyone should have access to necessary information and resources. Another [Call for Action](#) was prepared by the GiHA Working Group, along with Protection Working Group, GBV sub-cluster, PSEA network and Gender Hub for gender-responsive COVID-19 response in Cox's Bazar.

As part of Generation Equality in **China**, UN Women joined 12 United Nations organizations and the Tencent Youth platform to host 11 livestreamed youth dialogues. In vibrant exchanges, young people shared creative solutions on countering gender gaps that are widening due to COVID-19, and they discussed the leadership roles that youth can take.

Consultations with women's rights networks in **Myanmar** resulted with women civil society organisations issuing an advocacy statement to the Government of Myanmar calling on the government of Myanmar and development partners to meaningfully include women's organizations in the implementation of the Myanmar's COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP) and to engender its implementation.

**Regionally**, and looking towards what will likely be a protracted recovery period, UN Women convened eight diverse women's organizations, including those representing refugee women, home-based workers, lesbian, bisexual and queer women, women with disabilities, rural women and adolescent girls, to showcase how their organizations are responding to the crisis and major funding needs as the pandemic continues. More than 120 participants listened in during a regional COVID-19 meeting involving all major humanitarian actors and donors. It led the regional GiHA Working Group to reach out to national counterparts and support their efforts to ensure women-focused organizations gain access to humanitarian planning and programming.

## A CALL FOR EQUAL TREATMENT

*For the LGBTQI community in Timor-Leste, COVID-19 "has brought on financial issues and affected their ability to afford basic needs, especially for those who live alone and are dependent on others because they have been kicked out of their house. Those who are isolated and live with their family at home may face increased violence if their identity is not fully accepted. They might be forced to behave in a way that their family expects them to. To address this pandemic, everyone needs to come together and treat each other equally."*

— Laura Afonso de Jesus, human rights activist and Executive Director for CODIVA, the LGBTQI umbrella network in Timor-Leste

## MAKING LINKS TO KEEP SOCIETIES TOGETHER

The COVID-19 response has brought opportunities to bolster social cohesion in areas pressured by social fractures predating the pandemic. UN Women has acted quickly to link pandemic responses to efforts to stabilize communities, including through support for livelihoods and by opening space for women's leadership.

In the southern border provinces of **Thailand**, ongoing conflict and the movement of people across the border opened the door to higher rates of virus transmission, but information and technology to access it were both in short supply. UN Women joined local women's leaders and groups to widely share messages around social cohesion, including over community radio, while distributing essential health and hygiene supplies. Local women's groups distributed vegetable seeds and produced thousands of face masks that provided income for them, and protection for vulnerable groups in remote communities through a distribution drive organized by UN Women.

**Indonesia's** Peace Villages have become an integral part of UN Women's efforts to involve women in promoting peaceful communities and preventing violent extremism. As the pandemic spread, local women leaders trained under the initiative warned of the threat to local jobs and food security, both potential spurs of unrest. With the support of UN Women and other United Nations agencies and national partners, women-led task forces in Peace Villages across Java managed the emergency distribution of food and hygiene products, such as soap and disinfectant, and ensured compliance with health protocols. Task force members also helped clean public spaces, produce and distribute masks, and establish new facilities, such as public handwashing stations. They created WhatsApp collectives to share information and sell locally produced goods to sustain livelihoods. Food stall owners, for instance, used what quickly became online marketplaces to arrange takeaway orders and home delivery.

UN Women partnered with Mythos Labs to research potential links between the COVID-19 pandemic and online misogyny and hate speech directed at women in South and South-East Asia. The findings revealed that digital platforms and online spaces are being increasingly used to spread

sexist, inaccurate and dangerous rhetoric, inciting hatred and potentially provoking violence, online and offline. The UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific used these insights to increase digital literacy and online engagement, especially among young women leaders in **Bangladesh** and the **Philippines**. The young women learned how to push a counternarrative through online videos promoting gender equality and social cohesion, as well as to identify, protect against and report online hate-speech, misinformation and fake news.

In **Fiji**, the economic impact of COVID-19 has devastated many communities, especially communities in rural areas and those depending on the tourism sector. Women and girls are disproportionately impacted in multiple ways. For example, women and girls are bearing an increased burden of unpaid care work as they are caring for more people with less money. Women are also more likely to have less secure and less lucrative income-generating opportunities so when crisis hits, it hits hard. With economic strain and increased tensions within families and communities, including food insecurity, women and girls are at increased risk of experiencing gender-based violence from their partners and family members. To mitigate these GBV risks, UN Women supported CSO-partner Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises and Development (FRIEND) with 30 wheelchairs, food aid for 500 families and school supplies for 500 girls and boys. Focused on female-headed households and those households that are experiencing heightened poverty, the goal of this acute support is to address the unequal economic impact of COVID-19 on women and girls and mitigate, albeit temporarily, the risks of GBV.

In **Myanmar** and the **Philippines**, UN Women mobilized funds for women, peace and security to support civil society responses in the context of COVID-19 and set directions for the future of work on these issues. A global event in **Viet Nam** at the end of 2020 considered COVID-19 and links to escalating concerns about climate security, cybersecurity and health security.

Across **Asia and the Pacific**, UN Women has issued alerts on gender dimensions of peace and security in the next phase of the COVID-19 response, including [“Beyond the Lockdowns: Women, Peace and Security and COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific”](#). Widely shared briefs have called attention to the impact of the pandemic on women in prisons as well as women's human rights defenders.





# Sustaining gains through social protection



# SUSTAINING GAINS THROUGH SOCIAL PROTECTION

The economic impact of COVID-19 has been severe for women, many of whom were highly vulnerable even before the pandemic, given that a large share of women have insecure and often poorly paid informal jobs. Building on its widely respected role as a champion of rights for all women, but particularly those most at risk of being left behind, UN Women has led advocacy for social protection that cushions the pandemic's blows for women least equipped to cope, which has sustained hope and momentum for recovery. UN Women has also brought unprecedented attention to women's burden of unpaid care work in homes and families, a long-standing issue in Asia and the Pacific that is finally gaining the visibility it deserves.

With support from the Government of **Japan**, the Asia and Pacific regional team of UN Women provided urgent assistance for vulnerable women and girls under the COVID-19 crisis, particularly focusing on **Bangladesh**, **Indonesia**, **Myanmar** and the **Philippines**. In Bangladesh and Indonesia, UN Women cash-based interventions were advanced to provide immediate financial support with the provision of equipment and supplies and vocational trainings according to women's needs, including migrant workers. At least 1,539 women secured temporary income to maintain their basic needs while learning new skills through vocational trainings to enhance businesses for sustainable revenue in the long run.

In **Indonesia**, UN Women supported a pilot of an innovative cash-for-work programme that has been designed to provide income generation opportunities specifically for women through production of the essential goods and PPE kits as part of the social protection response to COVID-19 that can potentially be scaled up. At the broader policy level together with UNDP and UNICEF, UN Women support the Ministry of National Development Planning (BAPPENAS) to better define eligibility, guided by new vulnerability criteria that include gender. Under the leadership of the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection, UN Women in partnership with UNFPA supported the development of umbrella guidelines and standard operating procedures to coordinate a comprehensive social protection package that strengthened essential services for women and children experiencing violence during COVID-19.

To complement broader efforts by the Government of **Nepal**, UN Women put forward a comprehensive package of in-kind support such as food as well as cash transfers for women from excluded groups, including LGBTQI people. The package covered access to food, clean energy, essential supplies, information, health care, and financial and digital services, and it supported leadership and movement-building as well. It will reach approximately 3,000 women in 2021 across different provinces, with results used for advocating continued and scaled-up support.



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

In **Papua New Guinea**, UN Women raised emergency funds that doubled the number of women market vendors accessing social protection assistance, easing the crisis for 26,000 women in 14 markets across 11 provinces. After a rapid assessment found that female market vendors were suffering a loss of 51 per cent of

daily income during COVID-19, UN Women established partnerships with local and provincial governments and market management authorities to sustain women's continued safe participation in the informal economy during the pandemic.

A rapid assessment of women market vendors on the socio-economic impact of COVID 19, exacerbated by Tropical Cyclone Harold, was conducted by UN Women across municipal markets in **Fiji**, **Solomon Islands**, and **Vanuatu**. Initial findings showed the pandemic had hit vendor incomes hard, leading to a significant reduction in vendor incomes across the three countries. A survey conducted at varying stages of each country's response period found that 87.7 per cent of vendors across Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu said their income has decreased during the COVID 19 crisis, 56 per cent said their income decreased by more than half, 27.9 per cent said their income was halved and 15 per cent said their income decreased by less than half. Key reasons provided for the loss of income by women market vendors included reduced customers, reduced hours and increased supply chain costs and mobility and accessibility complications. In **Fiji**, UN Women worked together with FAO to distribute seeds to women market vendors, along with some basic farming tools to ensure sustained livelihood during the pandemic for the women market vendors and promoting consistent supply

of fresh local produce at municipal markets. UN Women, in partnership with UNDP, raised funds to procure seeds which will be distributed to women market vendors in **Solomon Islands** and **Vanuatu**, to mitigate the ongoing economic impact of COVID 19.

A partnership with the ILO brought together women's networks in **Timor-Leste** to monitor the government Monetary Support Programme to ensure it would cover women most in need. Systematic outreach to more than 400 women helped reveal key gaps in reaching those who are most vulnerable. The process drew attention to the especially high access barriers faced by LGBTQI people, people with disabilities and domestic workers.

A rapid response project in the **Philippines** put emergency cash and in-kind support in the hands of 10 women's collectives to support women affected by both armed conflict and the pandemic. Among other achievements, the programme helped women build small businesses through marketing products on an online platform. A similar initiative extended cash assistance to 20 cooperatives of women from marginalized groups, and provided 5,200 women with online learning sessions on gender and social enterprises.



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/Ilicsa Ravucic



In **Bangladesh**, UN Women organized a series of virtual dialogues on gender-responsive social protection in light of COVID-19, which highlighted large exclusion errors in targeting recipients under current schemes. The talks also focused on a lack of transparency and accountability in selecting beneficiaries and the insufficient reach of social protection for marginalized women and gender-diverse people, particularly in the informal economy. The participants in the virtual dialogues shaped recommendations and powerful advocacy messages to draw attention to marginalized women in the next five-year national development plan and the United Nations socioeconomic response framework.

Early in the pandemic, UN Women supported a rapid survey in five of the most vulnerable districts of Bangladesh that identified more than 2,300 people, mostly those who are gender diverse, women with disabilities, widows, sex workers, survivors of gender-based violence, and so on, for immediate cash assistance as well as support in learning how to protect themselves from COVID-19 and gender-based violence. New insights into why these groups are often left out of government relief assistance are now being used by the wider humanitarian community as part of sustaining critical assistance.

In **Thailand**, a policy recommendation on a top-up stimulus package, advanced through a partnership between the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, ILO, UNICEF, the IOM and UN Women, meant at least 12 million vulnerable individuals benefitted through the Child Support Grant, Disability Grant and Old Age Allowance schemes. This provided an income boost to recipients and their households, particularly women in the informal sector with few other protections.

In some countries, the pandemic has highlighted combined vulnerabilities resulting from disease as well as a deteriorating environment and climate. UN Women with the United Nations Environment Programme conducted rapid socioeconomic assessments of pandemic impacts on women-led businesses in renewable energy at the community level in **Bangladesh, Cambodia and Viet Nam**. The assessments covered specific localities prone to natural disasters and pinpointed pressures related to employment (paid and unpaid), health and well-being, and social protection. In **Viet Nam**, UN Women joined the FAO to extend small cash grants to 3,500 impoverished people in Tran Van Thoi district hit by COVID-19 and a protracted drought. Women in the district used the funds to restart small agricultural businesses and send children to school, among other essential needs.

## EXTENDING A HELPING HAND

*“Women are the hardest hit by this pandemic. Many have now lost their jobs. People in my village are saying that women are to blame for the pandemic, that the coronavirus is God’s punishment. I try to make people understand that these misogynist ideas and superstitions are wrong.”*

*“During the pandemic, I have developed several initiatives to help the most vulnerable women and children in my community. One example is a handwashing campaign for children. I am also leading the “Token of Love” initiative distributing essential food and hygiene items to 30 families in two villages.”*

— Umme Kulsum, President of Women Peace Café at Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur, Bangladesh

## MORE CLEANING, GREATER WORRY

*“For my job, I have to clean more often, especially on the frequently touched spots like handrails. I am quite afraid of the spread, but I have no other choice: no work, no pay. I have to pay for a room and food. Everybody’s afraid of one another. When we see someone cough, we get paranoid. It’s scary, especially when we need to touch handrails or other frequently touched areas. However, I protect myself, wearing gloves and glasses every time I work.”*

*“I want it to go away soon so everybody can live a normal life again. Now we need to be very patient, and we will get through this together.”*

— Malinee Kongpan, who cleans stations in the transit system in Bangkok, working hard to keep them safe and hygienic

## SEIZING A CHANCE TO SHIFT THE BURDEN OF UNPAID CARE

During pandemic lockdowns as people were confined at home, children were out of school and health systems were overloaded, issues around unpaid care work and who does it came forward as never before. On any given day in Asia and the Pacific, women spend on average four times as much time on unpaid care work as men, and in some cases, this reaches 11 times more. One of the most important ways to recover and build back better is to reduce an onerous and unfair burden that also constrains women's contributions to the broader economy. UN Women has called for a more equal sharing of tasks in households, along with the society-wide provision of accessible, affordable and quality care services.

Taking a clear-cut opportunity to advocate changes in norms in Thailand, UN Women kicked off the [#HeForSheAtHome](#) campaign, which [engaged more than 150 original content creators](#) across various social media platforms, including through a dedicated partnership with TikTok. With more than 46 million views, the campaign encouraged men to create respectful relationships at home and contribute equally when it comes to housework. In Bangladesh, a version of HeForSheAtHome used videos and photographs of men sharing housework to send a message that this is possible and desirable. Texts on “sharing the load” streamed out to nearly 408,000 mobile phone users, almost half of them female. Recognizing the extreme pressures of the pandemic, the messages included the national helpline number for gender-based violence.

In China, the one-month social media campaign [#ShareTheCare#](#), led by UN Women and ILO, with the support from FAO, UNAIDS and UNICEF, reached over 1.3 million views, 1,393 reposts and 1,453 discussions on Weibo. Designed in line with China UN Gender Theme Group Work Plan Priorities 2020, the campaign [#ShareTheCare#](#) is intended to raise the public awareness of imbalanced increase of unpaid care work women take during the COVID-19 pandemic period, and to contribute to the wider effort on further realizing women's rights.

In Afghanistan, the “Share the Care” campaign launched in May, encouraged women and men to share the burden of caregiving within households. The campaign consisted of short stories, curated by UN Women Afghanistan communications team, on how Afghan women and men share the burden of care at home. The campaign featured well-

known Afghan women, and young women activists. The campaign included the option for UN Women's digital followers to share their own stories on how they “share the care” through their social media channels.



In Malaysia, the mobile caregiving platform Kiddocare has pioneered a novel model. Working parents can make quick links online to affordable, quality babysitting services, while 600 women workers gain decent jobs. During COVID-19, the platform remained one of the few options for childcare for frontline workers, even as it also piloted innovations like virtual nannies to provide stimulation and continued learning for children stuck at home. Kiddocare's model now presents a recovery platform, opening doorways for some women to take on new jobs and gain professional skills while offering an affordable service that enables other women to return to work. As an exemplary model of innovative, market-based solutions to the current care emergency, Kiddocare is collaborating with UN Women to further develop and roll out similar care entrepreneurship models in other countries in Asia and the Pacific.

UN Women has partnered with Oxfam and Amnesty International to [launch a new Care Compact](#) recommending how to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on unpaid and underpaid care workers. It maps immediate steps for governments and businesses, such as extending social protection measures to providers of unpaid care, allowing flexible working hours and launching campaigns to promote the equal sharing of care in homes. Over the longer term, the Compact calls for legislation to recognize and support providers of unpaid care work, investment in care infrastructure, and the creation of 100 million secure and decent care jobs.



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/Pin Law Aung, Nan San Hom and Marie Sophie

# Building back better: recovery and resilience



# BUILDING BACK BETTER: RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE

The road to recovery from COVID-19 will likely be a long one, but despite its challenges, it also opens opportunities to reset some of the drivers of the explosive spread of the pandemic. Building back better, among other elements, requires economies that no longer automatically relegate women to many of the worst, more vulnerable jobs, or depend on women performing most unpaid care work around households. It means fully and finally realizing the human rights of marginalized groups, including women migrant workers.

Towards moving the needle, UN Women has rallied partners in the public and private sectors to call for women's participation and leadership in all decision-making around economic recovery measures, and for strategies easing harm to women's livelihoods. Advocacy for economic stimulus packages to do more than just assist big businesses emphasized reaching workers, including the disproportionate share of women in the informal sector, and small and medium-sized enterprises that underpin the region's economy.

A initial step was marshalling evidence of some of the specific – and profound – economic consequences for women. Rapid gender analysis in **Myanmar**, for instance, found that around 50 per cent of 700,000 workers in the garment sector, mainly women, risked losing jobs temporarily or permanently. Since nearly 91 per cent of women who work do so in the informal economy

and lack access to social protection schemes, they are acutely vulnerable to economic downturn and more so if it lasts over time. The Government went on to create an [emergency fund](#) of 100 billion kyat (approximately \$72 million) prioritizing three sectors, including the garment sector. It aims to sustain local factories and protect jobs and workers' livelihoods.

In the **Pacific island countries**, fast action by governments contained the COVID-19 health crisis. But economic disruption has been significant. Times have been particularly hard for women market vendors, who have seen incomes fall by as much as 75 per cent. UN Women's successful negotiation with the Government in **Fiji** kept markets open as essential services, with social distancing measures in place and a waiver of market stall fees for 3 months for all market vendors. In **Papua New Guinea**, a pre-crisis programme to revamp Gordons market, the largest of its kind in the Pacific, paid new dividends as it had enough space and hygiene and other facilities to continue operating safely.

UN Women has been a constant voice encouraging companies across the region to include gender-sensitive measures in business recovery strategies, pointing to well-documented economic benefits, and greater resilience to future challenges. An important existing vehicle for these messages has been the [Women's Empowerment Principles](#) (WEPs), established by UN Women and the United Nations



Global Compact as a set of 7 Principles that provide a holistic framework for enterprises to improve gender equality across their value chains, such as by ensuring gender-equal corporate leadership and equal pay for work of equal value.

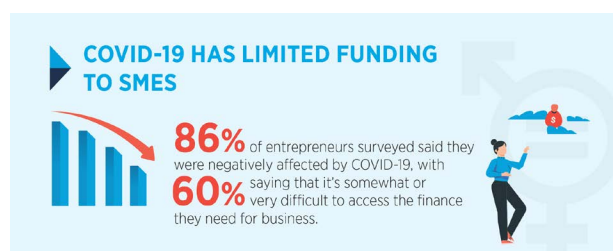
More than 4,200 companies worldwide have signed the WEPs, but Asia and the Pacific lagged behind other regions – until the pandemic. By September, spurred by growing evidence of the need to rethink how economies and businesses operate, so that people and the planet are valued as much as profit, the number of signatories from the region shot up by nearly 43 per cent, reaching 839.

Much of the impetus behind growing business engagement in gender equality and women's empowerment has come through the WeEmpower Asia programme, a partnership between UN Women and the European Union to boost women's leadership and roles in the private sector and strengthen inclusive global trade. In April 2020, as the pandemic took off, the programme collaborated with the BOP Innovation Center to survey to conduct a regional assessments of the impacts on women entrepreneurs in the region. A striking [infographic](#) presented findings as a guide for encouraging gender-inclusive entrepreneurship. As captured in a striking infographic, survey data revealed the severe impacts on SMEs and also the worsening of existing challenges already faced by women entrepreneurs, such as women's disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work. The [Private Sector Pulse Check](#) report went into greater detail, drawing on interviews with 65 chief executive officers and business leaders in Europe and seven countries in Asia and the Pacific. It found that less than a third had taken specific actions to support women employees, a gap that had mostly gone unrecognized. This new evidence now provides a powerful impetus to move towards a more inclusive recovery.

In collaboration with Investing in Women, UN Women also conducted large-scale surveys of the effects of COVID-19 on the private sector in the [Philippines](#), [Viet Nam](#), and [Indonesia](#) to better assess the impacts and needs of both employers and employees to strengthen UN Women's support towards the private sector to build back better in a more gender-inclusive way. To provide clear, targeted support for gender-inclusive recovery, UN Women produced a series of guidance notes for action, including an overall guidance note [Women as a Force for Accelerated and Inclusive Economic Recovery Post- COVID-19 in Asia- Pacific](#), as well as three additional notes targeted for the [private sector](#), [SMEs](#) and [women migrant workers](#). In addition, the [COVID-19 and Gender Rapid Self- Assessment Tool](#) was developed to enable companies to assess their COVID-19 response and key areas of prioritization to ensure they are responding in a gender-sensitive manner throughout their value chain.

UN Women is also working on a series of guidance notes for governments, donors and the private sector to ramp up support for women's economic empowerment, and there are plans for a series of impact assessments with private sector partners, including an entrepreneurship and investor survey and a survey of employees across supply chains.

As a way of showing, in concrete terms, how businesses can move forward, WeEmpowerAsia debuted the [WEPs Activator](#). Through this unique capacity-building programme, cohorts of 15 companies will take a 10-month journey to learn about the WEPs, assess their current progress and create an action plan to build a more gender-inclusive business and supply chain. The first to test this initiative is [amfori](#), a global business association for open and sustainable trade. It links more than 2,400 members from more than 40 countries.



With this increased focus on working with the private sector in times of COVID to ensure that business further step up their commitments around gender-equality, UN women also launched the [UN Women Asia-Pacific WEPs Awards](#), the first-ever regional awards initiative to recognize exemplary business practice for gender equality aligned to the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs). Open to any private sector organization in the Asia-Pacific and awarding best practices in 6 categories, the WEPs Awards generated significant interest, receiving more than 400 applications from 17 countries. Key UN Women stakeholders were engaged through national level ceremonies in five countries, and the process culminated with the [UN Women Asia-Pacific WEPs Awards Regional Ceremony](#) on December 15th. Attended by 50 people in Bangkok and watched live by more than 2,200 viewers from various sectors and countries, the event successfully marked UN Women Asia-Pacific's first hybrid event.

In **Viet Nam**, UN Women brought more than 100 business leaders together in a virtual and in-person forum, “Equality Means Business”, to exchange ideas on promoting women’s participation in supply chains and increasing investments in achieving gender equality through corporate policies and community actions. Twenty-one businesses, including Saigon Food and Unilever Viet Nam, signed the WEPs.

Funding from a local foundation in **China** assisted economic recovery in hard-hit Hubei and Tianjin, targeting women-led small and medium-sized enterprises. A partnership with the Mulan Club, one of China’s influential associations of women entrepreneurs, orchestrated social media and other outreach mobilizing companies to respond to COVID-19 in line with the WEPs.

In the **Philippines**, UN Women hosted a series of webinars on gender-inclusive business recovery planning that reached people across the country, and yielded guidance for companies to be more gender-responsive and inclusive in response and recovery measures. Online community meet-ups helped more than 700 women entrepreneurs and freelancers gain digital skills and ideas to transition to online business models, while an industry-specific Facebook Live event on pivoting tourism businesses drew more than 2,600 views. As part of a discussion series called #WomenRiseAboveCovid19, more than 6,000 people viewed a session on accessing financing for women-led and owned enterprises during the pandemic and beyond.

The [Industry Disruptor](#), an incubation and mentorship programme piloted in **India**, lived up to its name by producing innovative solutions to redirect the fashion industry to produce less waste and be more sustainable. Backed by a partnership with the DO School, the programme connects fledgling entrepreneurs with industry experts to scale up solutions, access international supply chains and be part of a global network dedicated to social change.

Through WeEmpowerAsia, UN Women has been collaborating strongly with innovative enterprises, such as the DoSchool to implement our programme. This enabled a very rapid adaption of entire programme streams, such as the Industry Disruptor to the COVID-19 context. Re-designed to run entirely online, the programme only worked in the highly impacted textile sector, but at the same time it worked with women-led enterprises in these value-chains who have been impacted strongly. More than 80 women entrepreneurs participated in a six-week online course to assess the crisis, retool their business strategies and hone skills to pitch their ventures. Following the training and initial pitching sessions, almost

## FORGING STRONG BONDS TO SHARE THE STRUGGLE

*“The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a huge dip in sales and resultant fear that we may not be able to pay our staff and weavers. My most memorable experience in the Industry Disruptor has been the ease with which I am able to connect with like-minded cohort members. We have become a strong group of friends offline and it is really good to have some like-minded friends from the same sector who understand your struggle and what you feel.”*

— Rameshwari Kaul, co-founder of Cotton Rack in India

two dozen participants went to a three-day business boot camp with major industry partners such as H&M and Tchibo, where they developed innovations that were both fashion forward and sustainable, and that now are under consideration for further development by both corporations. Moving forward, Tchibo has proposed developing an immersive gaming experience to build empathy for workers as well as a resource library for fair supply chains. H&M is considering a sustainability innovation centre and inventory management strategies to reduce overstock.

UN Women and India’s Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology launched the [COVID-19 Sri Shakti Challenge](#) to promote women’s leadership in technology solutions to pandemic challenges. Out of more than 1,200 entries, 11 finalists were selected and funded to develop a proof of concept, with innovations ranging from UV-based sterilization to chemical free sanitizers to a DOBOT or robotic arm that would ease the work of doctors and nurses. Each finalist will receive support in developing their ideas while working with seasoned mentors, and then three will be selected and awarded 500,000 rupees to roll out their solutions.

Another UN Women partnership in India is with [DharmaLife](#), which has mobilized 120,000 rural women as entrepreneurs through campaigns that seed a



“positive restlessness”, including aspirations to start new businesses. A mobile app will draw on popular Hindi film dialogues and other creative techniques to spark new thinking and behaviours, and help women make links to training, value chains and government schemes. The process will be supported by 1,200 entrepreneurs who will work with local women to learn, grow and share insights about business development as well as other critical issues such as protection from gender-based violence.

In June, the 2020 [United Nations Virtual Forum on Responsible Business and Human Rights](#) attracted more than 6,600 registrants from 101 countries. The **Asia and the Pacific** regional team of UN Women led or took part in 8 out of 18 sessions where it highlighted solutions to women’s unpaid care work, family-friendly policies in the workplace, the role of business in mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 on women migrant workers, and accountability and transparency in value chains. The event attracted more than 90,000 views online and widespread media coverage.

UN Women has also drawn the attention of powerful multilateral development banks to the gender dimensions

of the economic impact of the pandemic. A new collaboration with the Asian Development Bank will back gender-responsive recovery measures, including through improved data and budgets that factor gender into both spending and revenue-raising choices. Together ADB and UN Women have started to conduct a Landscaping Report about the current Status of Gender-Responsive Procurement in the Asia-Pacific and are planning to implement further programming to support women-owned businesses by providing market-access and connecting them to public and private procurement schemes.

UN Women’s Independent Evaluation Service led Country Portfolio Evaluations in select countries. The Evaluation and Audit of **Viet Nam** found that the country office analysis related to COVID-19 has been timely and relevant to the needs of Viet Nam. Partners noted that UN Women is in a unique position to tackle increased gender inequalities, exacerbated as a result of the pandemic, including burden of family care, exposure to domestic violence, as well as loss of job and/or income sources, through focusing on women’s economic empowerment and by leveraging its convening power as a strategic niche for the future.



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

## USING TECHNOLOGY AND DATA INNOVATION TO COMBINE BIG DATA, QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS TO PROVIDE EVIDENCE FOR EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

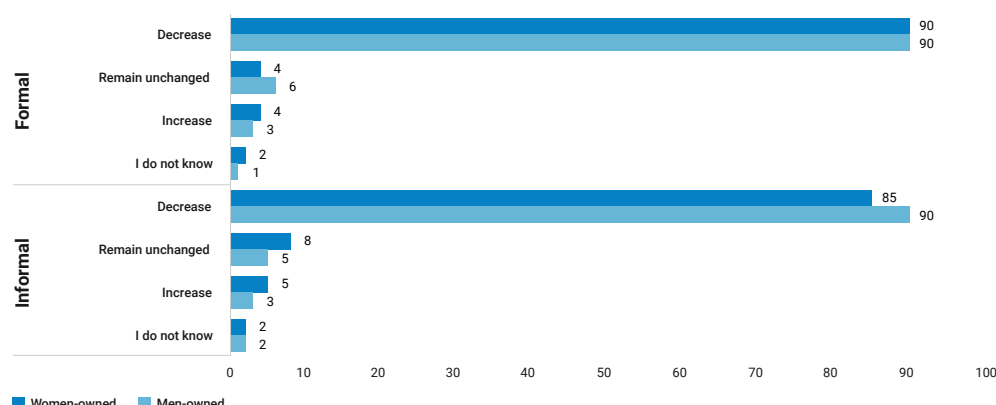
How are small woman-owned enterprises faring during the pandemic? That is a question national policymakers need to answer. Otherwise, it becomes difficult to develop targeted programmes that deliver what these businesses need. Collectively, since they play a major role in the economy, recovery depends on helping small enterprises regain lost ground and move forward.

In Indonesia, women own nearly 65 per cent of all registered smaller businesses, but they tend to cluster in sectors with lower value and return. While the Government has put millions of rupiyahs into economic stimulus strategies, these need to incorporate a stronger gender lens. There is a risk that women-owned micro and small businesses will miss out and an opportunity will be lost, given growing recognition that women's participation in business and the workforce will be key not just to recovery, but to longer-term productivity to

ensure inclusive economic transformation towards digitalisation. Digital platforms have soared in importance during pandemic lockdowns, because they offer convenience for consumers and a chance to sustain livelihoods for many smaller businesses. They also offer a rich trove of big data on how women's businesses are coping. To tap that, UN and Pulse Lab Jakarta jointly produced an innovative policy research with the support of GOJEK, a billion-dollar technology unicorn with digital platforms reaching millions across Indonesia. This partnership is mining and analysing data vital for shaping future strategies, including those to inject cash into women-owned micro and small businesses that are the backbone to Indonesia's economy.

Indonesia and many other countries have faced challenges in general in collecting data on the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic. Traditional survey methods relying on face-to-face interviews and field observation halted as the virus began to spread. As a workaround, UN Women partnered with Indosat Ooredoo, a leading telecommunication company in Indonesia to collect data, using a web-based survey link that was launched through SMS messages across the country. It garnered the first reliable, nationally representative evidence of the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic on women.

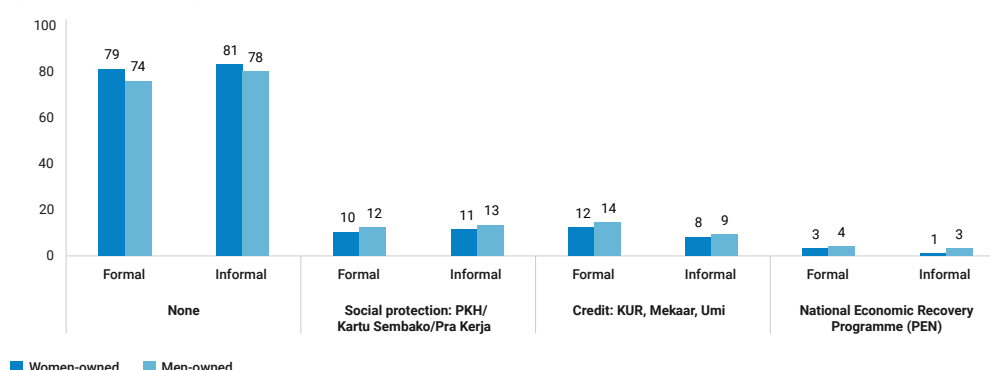
**Proportion of MSBs that saw changes in revenues since the onset of COVID-19, by sex of the owner and informality**  
(percentage, n=1,960)



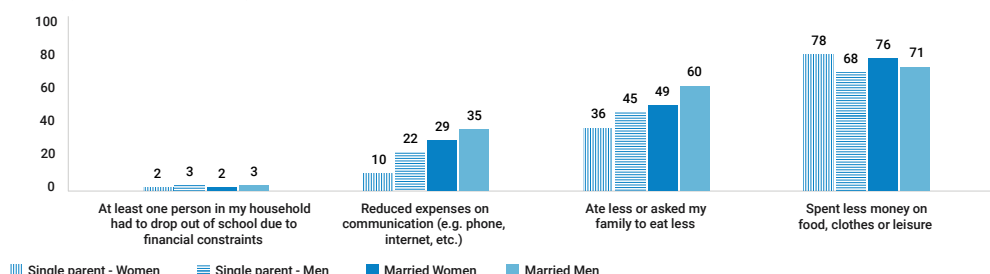
The data affirmed women's vulnerabilities to economic shocks and the risk that pre-existing inequalities would deepen during the crisis. For instance, twice as many women as men had changed locations in Indonesia as a result of job losses and cuts in pay. With women largely dependent on family businesses for income, more than 80 per cent have seen their income decline. Digitisation alone is

not enough to help MSBs survive. Men MSB owners are more likely to apply a wider range of strategies to combat revenue loss, with greater access to finance and assets compared to women. Women were far more likely than men to report setbacks in mental health and increased responsibilities for children and unpaid care.

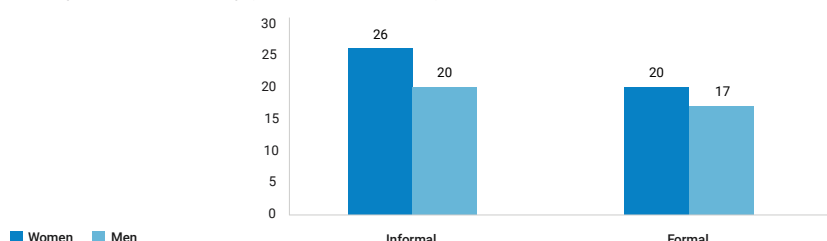
**Proportion of MSBs that benefited from stimulus programmes, by sex of the owner and informality (percentage, n=1,865)**



**Proportion of people that implemented personal coping strategies since the onset of COVID-19, by sex and marital status (percentage, n=1,685)**



**Proportion of people who chose not to see a doctor when they needed one as a coping strategy to combat income loss, by sex and informality (percentage, n= 1,885)**





## KEEPING WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS SAFE AND EASING A HARD JOURNEY HOME

COVID-19 has posed multiple risks for migrant women workers, many of whom were already vulnerable to violence and poor working conditions. Amid states of emergency and lockdowns, those who kept jobs faced increased threats of workplace violence, abuse and exploitation, especially in domestic work. For women migrant workers who returned to their countries, the journey has entailed lost income and limited prospects for new employment, along with the potential for sexual violence in mandatory COVID-19 quarantine facilities, and little in the way of assistance given the disruption of essential services.

Having long called for providing full and equal protection to all women migrants, in line with international law, UN Women, in partnership with the ILO, UNODC and IOM, has taken specific measures to ensure women migrant workers remain healthy and safe, and regain livelihoods as integral to recovery.

Recognizing the key role played by embassies and consulates in the prevention of and response to violence against women migrant workers through the provision of referral services (connecting survivors of violence to essential services available in the residing country), immediate support or repatriation services, especially during COVID-19, UN Women prioritized strategic support through the finalization of two training tools for Foreign Affairs and Consulate officials on 1) VAW, trafficking and migration and 2) Violence against women migrant workers data collection. The tools were piloted in Viet Nam and Philippines and will be rolled out in other countries in the ASEAN region

As borders reopened and migrants began to stream back to Nepal, for example, UN Women helped women migrants meet immediate essential needs, such as for food, PPE and health care, and to begin developing alternative sources of income. In Cambodia, cash transfers for women migrants helped them to meet daily expenses. In Indonesia, UN Women distributed 3,000 PPE items to returned workers in quarantine centres and provided information on safety planning and local contacts for protection in cases of violence.

In Myanmar, UN Women was part of a coordination group on migration that assisted approximately 150,000 returning migrants between April and October 2020. Under the Safe and Fair regional

programme, assistance was repurposed to support quarantine facilities, strengthen referral mechanisms for violence against women and girls, conduct anti-discrimination and anti-stigma information campaigns and extend psychosocial support to female migrants. In Cambodia, a series of radio talk shows was aired, focusing on the risk of violence against women migrant workers especially during the pandemic, and detailing where to get support.

A partnership between UN Women and Unilever in Bangladesh distributed hygiene products to 10,000 women migrant workers in 10 districts. UN Women also collaborated with Badabon Sangha, a women-led grass-roots organization, to provide cash-for-work opportunities, such as in producing masks and dignity kits, and distributing health and hygiene products.



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

UN Women coordinated the extension of psychosocial services to female Filipino migrant workers both in the Philippines and abroad, ensuring access in households, quarantine facilities or employers' homes. Since caring for caregivers is also critical, UN Women sought to ensure these services reached frontline health workers, social welfare officers, police officers and others assisting women migrant workers. In collaboration with the Department of Foreign Affairs, UN Women organized a webinar series to equip embassy officials to better support women migrant workers during the upheaval, especially in cases of violence.

To celebrate the key role played by front-line service providers in addressing violence against women migrant workers during the pandemic, UNW, in partnership with ILO, launched a story series ["Lives on the Frontline: Reaching women migrant workers amid the COVID-19 pandemic"](#). The series, composed of 16 stories of frontline service providers who are supporting women migrant workers, especially those who have experienced violence, aimed to increase awareness about ensuring the availability of quality services for women migrant workers during the pandemic. In the series, service providers from Migrant Worker Resource Centres (MRCs), civil society organizations (CSOs), crisis centres, shelters, health and quarantine facilities, hotlines and the police, talk about what they, their colleagues and organizations are doing to ensure that women migrant workers experiencing violence have access to the support they need in these challenging times and how UNW and ILO have supported them. The story series and accompanying artwork was widely shared on social media during the 16 days of activism against GBV.

In tandem, a major national campaign in the Philippines, "Babaeng Biya (hero)", spotlighted the risks women migrant workers face and provided information on support services. Through talk shows on social media, prominent coverage by traditional media and celebrity endorsements, the campaign reached 73 million people.

For women across South-East Asia, UN Women issued cards in eight languages on how to make a safety plan and where to find support in cases of violence or abuse. These were widely shared by

women migrant worker's networks and centres, and distributed with PPE kits. UN Women led a comprehensive mapping of available services addressing violence against women, including women migrant workers, operating despite the lockdowns, validated and disseminated by CSOs in ASEAN. UN Women joined ILO to issue recommendations for critical protective government policy measures in line with human rights, including to assist women migrant workers in finding new employment, and to guarantee emergency relief and PPE regardless of immigration status.

As part of a continued support to the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) campaign against gender-based violence (GBV) and trafficking in persons (TIP), UNW, in partnership with ILO and IOM, developed an innovative social media campaign aimed at raising awareness on GBV and TIPs among women migrant workers in Thailand. Through a comprehensive social media package which has been developed in Khmer, Burmese, Lao, Thai and English, the campaign aimed to promote access of women migrant workers experiencing abuses, to government and NGO support channels in Thailand, including the Thai Ministry of Social Development and Human Security's 1300 Social Assistance Centre and 24/7 interpretation service. With #HelpIsHere1300 as the campaign hashtag, social media materials were shared, including a video with a dance routine using the campaign song.



Based on consultations between Atikha Overseas Workers and Communities Initiative, a UN Women partner, and local civil society organizations in Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar revealed that many women migrant workers are experiencing challenges in returning and reintegrating. These include a struggle to adjust to their home communities, especially amid lockdowns, and find employment matching their skills. Recognizing these and other vulnerabilities, UN Women and Atikha adjusted an economic empowerment programme for women migrant workers to bolster trainings on entrepreneurship and improve access to information and counselling.

# 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.





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