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Building Forward: Creating a More Equitable, Gender-Just, Inclusive, and Sustainable World



Executive Summary

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have undoubtedly been, and continue to be, terrible for individuals, communities, and countries. Yet the crisis provides the world with a unique opportunity, an opportunity to build forward rather than back. The purpose of this report is to highlight how best this can be done, via a holistic approach to economic, environmental and humanitarian policies, and by putting women and girls at the center of recovery and reform.

Through a comprehensive process of listening and learning, including reviewing hundreds of resources, CARE has identified women's economic justice and rights, green and gender-just recovery, and humanitarian response reforms as being key to building forward from COVID-19. Funding the prevention and treatment of the pandemic in a gender-equitable manner will be a critical tool in taking this approach forward.

Women in the frontline

In just six months, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world forever. The spread of the virus has triggered a global humanitarian crisis, infecting nearly 33.8 million people and killing nearly 1,010,000 people.¹ Borders have closed and economic activity has stalled, leading to predictions that the global economy will shrink by US\$12 trillion by the end of 2021.² The world lost the equivalent of 400 million full-time jobs between April and June 2020. In parallel, climate extremes have caused additional humanitarian hardship and suffering in many places and threaten to further unravel decades of development progress.

Although preliminary analyses indicate that COVID-19 poses a greater risk of severe illness and mortality to men than women,³ women and girls – particularly those affected by systemic inequalities – are bearing the brunt of the socioeconomic seisms that the pandemic has created. COVID-19 has disproportionately exposed women to health risks, as they make up the majority of health and social care workers⁴, and disproportionately affected their livelihoods – they are 1.8 times more likely to have lost their jobs during the crisis.⁵ At the same time, the already high amount of unpaid care work that women and girls perform, caring for elderly or sick family members and children out of school, is predicted to have risen by 1 to 2 hours per day.⁶

Lockdowns implemented to curb the spread of the virus have contributed to an increase in gender-based violence (GBV).⁷ For example, calls to domestic violence hotlines have risen between 60% and 775% in some countries since the pandemic began.⁸ Lockdowns have also caused global food insecurity to soar, which particularly affects women and girls in humanitarian settings.⁹ Meanwhile, movement restrictions have hampered relief organizations' responses to climate change-exacerbated natural disasters, which in turn

1 Johns Hopkins University (30 September 2020). 'Coronavirus Resource Center.' <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu>.

2 Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2020). '2020 Goalkeepers Report: COVID-19: A Global Perspective.' <https://www.gatesfoundation.org/goalkeepers/report/2020-report/#GlobalPerspective>.

3 Iwasaki, Akiko, & Aaron Ring (2020). 'The Coronavirus Affects Women and Men Differently—Learning How May Help Stop the Pandemic.' Yale School of Medicine. <https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/25385/>.

4 Boniol, Mathieu, et al. (2019). 'Gender Equity in the Health Workforce: Analysis of 104 Countries.' WHO. <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/311314/WHO-HIS-HWF-Gender-WP1-2019.1-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

5 Madgavkar, Anu, et al. (2020). 'COVID-19 and Gender Equality: Countering the Regressive Effects.' McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/covid-19-and-gender-equality-countering-the-regressive-effects#>.

6 CDC Group. (2020). 'COVID-19 and Women's Economic Empowerment: A Chance to Invest for Change?' <https://www.cdcgroup.com/en/news-insight/insight/articles/covid-19-and-womens-economic-empowerment-a-chance-to-invest-for-change/>.

7 UN Women (2020). 'COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls.' <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5006>.

8 ActionAid et al. (2020). 'Humanitarian Funding, Partnerships and Coordination in the COVID-19 Crisis: Perspectives From Local Women-led Organisations and Women's Rights Organisations.' <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/joint-agency-report-humanitarian-funding-partnerships-and-coordination-covid-19-crisis>.

9 Fuhrman, Sarah et al. (2020). 'Left Out and Left Behind: Ignoring Women Will Prevent Us From Solving the Hunger Crisis.' CARE. https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Left-Out-and-Left-Behind.pdf?_ga=2.178751074.794052625.1599152583-784388205.1589468431.

uniquely disadvantage women and girls.

COVID-19 response and recovery as an opportunity

These effects are well known, yet the immediate health and socioeconomic COVID-19 responses mobilized by national and international decision-makers have largely failed to focus on or prioritize the capabilities and needs of women and girls. It is critical that we respond to the pandemic's immediate impacts on health and economies. But at the same time, COVID-19's longer-term repercussions continue to unfold, threatening development progress, imperiling women's justice and rights, and allowing societies to push past the bounds of what the planet can bear. Ameliorating or reversing the impacts of the pandemic requires longer-term, deliberate strategies and funding to recover from and prevent future crises.

In fact, the pandemic has provided a regenerative opportunity to 'build forward'. To seize this opportunity, decision- and policy-makers must take a bold and comprehensive approach, one that pays special attention to **women's economic justice and rights, green and gender-just recovery, and humanitarian response reforms, while ensuring women's leadership across the board.** 'Building forward' requires more than returning economies and societies back to where they were before COVID-19. Rather, it involves tackling some of the world's systemic inequalities and their related failures in order to build a more equitable future. Rebuilding more equitable economies and societies can in turn support a strong pandemic recovery: prioritizing women's economic opportunities can stimulate global gross domestic product (GDP) growth by US\$5 trillion.¹⁰ However, if existing issues are not addressed, global GDP could decrease by US\$1 trillion by 2030.¹¹

There is recognition from a multitude of actors – from certain governments to international institutions, from cities to private business and civil society – that the COVID-19 recovery can be an opportunity to correct the previous imbalances and advance much-needed reforms. This provides a beacon of hope that the crisis will catalyze increased political momentum and help lead to a better, more just and sustainable future.

Recoveries must reverse ingrained injustices

Even before COVID-19, our systems – our economic and financial structures, our ways of operating at the expense of the world we live in, our humanitarianism – did not work well. They contributed to widening inequity and accelerated the climate crisis. Many women were already engaged in precarious forms of work and in the informal sector. They were largely left unprotected from crises: social protection schemes did not sufficiently cover the sectors – such as entertainment and hospitality, or the informal economy – where women worked. Nor did they safeguard women who faced structural discriminations, such as women of color or those with different migration statuses. Underlying gender discrimination further prevented women and girls from fully realizing their economic rights and opportunities. They performed three times as much unpaid care work as men and had significantly lower access to and control over productive resources, assets and rights (**see Chapter 2**).

Few countries have made much progress toward addressing climate change or the equity dimensions of the climate crisis. The richest 1% of the global population contributes more to the climate crisis than the poorest 50%. Annual fossil fuel subsidies continue at a scale equivalent to 20 to 30 times the estimated cost of climate change adaptation in developing countries for 2030 or approximately 170 times estimated annual humanitarian finance needs.¹² Yet most of the solutions needed to tackle climate change already exist today. Many can provide joint benefits to both COVID-19 response and climate action in terms of mitigation and adaptation, while also

10 Unnikrishnan, Shalini & Cherie Blair (2019). 'Want to Boost the Global Economy by \$5 Trillion? Support Women as Entrepreneurs.' Boston Consulting Group. <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2019/boost-global-economy-5-trillion-dollar-support-women-entrepreneurs>.

11 Madgavkar, Anu, et al. (2020). 'COVID-19 and Gender Equality: Countering the Regressive Effects.' McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/covid-19-and-gender-equality-countering-the-regressive-effects#>.

12 See 'Ensuring a Green and Gender-just Recovery for Climate Resilience and Emission Reductions.' p. 27.

delivering strong economic opportunities for women. For example, while women hold just 22% of energy sector jobs overall, the renewable energy sector employs around 32% women. It is also thought that a care-led recovery (a sector that employs mainly women) would be a potentially green recovery, as care produces relatively less greenhouse gas emissions compared to other sectors (see Chapter 3).¹³

Women and girls – including when it comes to designing recovery policies – are largely absent from decision-making fora, which means their voices and priorities are not reflected in policies or political action. CARE has found that women made up just 24% of national-level COVID-19 response teams and that some countries sampled had not made any gender-specific COVID-19 funding or policy commitments at all.¹⁴ This is despite a study of 197 countries that found those with women leaders had significantly fewer deaths from COVID-19 (see Chapter 4).¹⁵ The absence of women is also evident in climate fora: CARE’s analysis of almost 350 climate-relevant measures and policies from the G20 countries found that none had an explicitly gender-differentiated approach or specifically supported women in the workforce. Analysis of the climate performance of recovery packages announced by governments also demonstrates the lack of attention paid to gender equality (see Chapter 3).

Meanwhile, humanitarian organizations, which aim to help people affected by emergencies, are frequently ignorant of their own biases and how perceptions regarding gender negatively influence their operations and the people they aim to support. For example, of 20 humanitarian and multisector COVID-19 response plans developed for countries in the Asia-Pacific region, 25% made no mention of any form of engagement with women’s groups or networks.¹⁶ Making matters worse, humanitarian responses often ignore women and girls, failing to fund either the activities that women and girls identify as most needed or the organizations that they lead.

These failures are compounded by gaps in humanitarian and development data collection, analysis and use, which rarely collect data disaggregated by sex or other factors. For example, recent research on COVID-19 and hunger response strategies found that 46% of the documents reviewed did not mention women and girls at all and did not provide any sex- and age- disaggregated data.¹⁷ Intentional or not, this renders women and girls largely invisible, makes responses less effective, and means there is no evidence to determine how successful responses are for women and girls or how to improve them (Chapter 5).

Even pre-COVID-19, we were off track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The decline of global poverty has slowed in recent years, while women and girls continue to be subjected to practices that negatively affect their lives and livelihoods.¹⁸ The repercussions of COVID-19 have further put these goals out of reach, reinforcing existing inequalities. Without mitigation, the pandemic could push an additional 47 million women and girls into poverty by 2021¹⁹ and widen the gender gap of extreme poverty to 121 women living on less than

13 Cohen, Maeve and Sherilyn MacGregor (2020). ‘Towards A Feminist Green New Deal for the UK.’ Women’s Budget Group and Women’s Environmental Network. <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Feminist-Green-New-Deal.pdf>.

14 Fuhrman, Sarah and Francesca Rhodes (2020). ‘Where Are The Women? The Conspicuous Absence of Women in COVID-19 Response Teams and Plans, and Why We Need Them.’ CARE International. <https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/publications/why-we-need-women-in-covid-19-response-teams-and-plans>.

15 Garikipati, Supriya and Uma Kambhampati (3 June 2020). ‘Leading the Fight Against the Pandemic: Does Gender ‘Really’ Matter?’ <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3617953> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3617953>.

16 Asia-Pacific Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group (2020). ‘Closing the Funding Gap for Women-Focused Organizations Responding to COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific.’ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/GiHA%20Gender%20and%20Funding%20in%20COVID-19.pdf>; ActionAid et al. (2020). ‘Humanitarian Funding, Partnerships and Coordination in the COVID-19 Crisis: Perspectives From Local Women-led Organisations and Women’s Rights Organisations.’ <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/joint-agency-report-humanitarian-funding-partnerships-and-coordination-covid-19-crisis>.

17 Fuhrman, Sarah et al. (2020). ‘Left Out and Left Behind: Ignoring Women Will Prevent Us From Solving the Hunger Crisis.’ CARE International. https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Left-Out-and-Left-Behind.pdf?_ga=2.66214566.963940214.1600875214-784388205.1589468431.

18 UN (2019). ‘The Sustainable Development Goals Report.’ <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2019.pdf>.

19 UN Women (2020). ‘From Insight to Action: Gender Equality in the Wake of COVID-19.’ <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/gender-equality-in-the-wake-of-covid-19-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5142>.

US\$1.9 per day for every 100 men.²⁰ This would mean that 435 million women would be living in extreme poverty.²¹

An evaluation of European Commission development funding found the percentage of development funding dedicated to strengthening gender equality remains very low, at around 3% in the period of 2014–18.²² Most current responses have failed to help shift the world to sustainable and resilient trajectories – and may even reinforce inequalities and make climate change worse. COVID-19 recoveries must intentionally reverse these developments (**see Chapter 6**). This requires a significant change in direction toward funding the prevention and treatment of COVID-19 in a way that takes gender into account.

How to begin building forward

This report is meant to help governments, international decision-makers and private sector stakeholders determine where to begin when building forward in these three interconnected areas, and how to effect concrete and bold changes.

‘Building forward’ means taking a holistic approach to economic, humanitarian and environmental policies, as the three areas of women’s **economic justice and rights, green and gender-just recovery, and humanitarian response reforms** are inextricably intertwined.

Climate change is causing more humanitarian crises and eroding previous development gains;²³ to respond, the humanitarian sector must adapt. Humanitarian assistance alone is not sufficient. Sustainable recovery from crises and transformative development cannot take place without strengthening women’s rights and opportunities, including in the economic sphere. Securing women’s and girls’ justice and rights is essential to securing their access to education and economic opportunities, and to building sustainable livelihoods to help them escape poverty.

To turn the tide and **foster an equitable, gender-just and sustainable recovery, we must act now**. To build forward, national governments and donors, multilateral organizations and private sector stakeholders should consider the following issues and recommendations:

- Inequitable gender norms and patriarchal systems continue to disadvantage women and girls. These lead to a range of inequalities, from GBV to the undervaluing of domestic and care work, to women’s exclusion from leadership positions. All actors must **prioritize gender equity throughout their strategies for economic and financial recovery, environmental policies and humanitarian response**. This means including women and girls in decision-making at all levels, shifting focus towards policies and measures that prioritize women and girls and strengthen gender equity, and engaging in organizational culture change that deconstructs harmful power structures and elevates and empowers women (**Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5**).
- Women and girls face significant structural barriers that prevent them from fully realizing economic justice and rights: they perform three times as much unpaid care work as men and boys, an amount that has increased 30–40% since the start of the pandemic. Inadequate safety nets and social protection schemes further impact their capacity to deal with crises and absorb economic shocks. To build forward,

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² European Commission (2019). ‘Evaluation of the EU’s External Action Support in the Area of Gender Equality and Women Empowerment.’

https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/gewe_eval_-_roadmap_final_version_for_publication.pdf.

²³ See, e.g., CARE Climate Change and Resilience Platform (July 2020). ‘Evicted By Climate Change: Confronting the Gendered Impacts of Climate-Induced Displacement.’ CARE International. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/evicted-climate-change-confronting-gendered-impacts-climate-induced-displacement>.

decision-makers must urgently **correct against the inequitable unpaid care burden and invest in universal social protection and safety nets during crises**. This requires investing in care and social services, while fostering the recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work, including by providing affordable and accessible childcare services, parental leave, flexible working and other family-friendly work policies. Decision-makers should also work towards providing gender-sensitive universal social protection and set up a global, multilateral fund for social protection as a first step **(Chapter 2)**.

- The economic effects of the pandemic have disproportionately harmed women and girls, who tend to be concentrated in the hardest-hit sectors or the informal economy. This is contributing to an increased risk of exposure to GBV, at home and in the workplace. Decision-makers should build forward by **promoting proactive labor market policies that create jobs, protect labor rights and ensure safety in the workplace**. Special consideration must go to workers in the informal economy. To prevent sexual harassment at work, governments should urgently ratify, resource and implement the International Labour Organization’s Violence and Harassment Convention (C190), while businesses should strengthen their policies and practices to meet this new international labor standard **(Chapter 2)**.
- In low-income countries, just one in four businesses is owned by women,²⁴ while only 67% of women hold a bank account with a formal financial institution, compared to 72% of men.²⁵ Women’s entrepreneurship is a precarious form of work, and access to financial products and services is often the only means that women have to cope with crises. To build forward, decision-makers should **strengthen women’s entrepreneurship and business opportunities and reduce barriers to access financial products and services**. Fostering women’s inclusion throughout value chains and developing gender-specific financial products and services is a good first step. **(Chapter 2)**.
- Climate change and weather extremes are having a devastating effect on communities around the world, particularly those in lower-resource countries. In some instances, climate change is exacerbating or causing new humanitarian crises. Pandemic recovery plans provide an opportunity to mitigate these effects, while **building forward in a way that increases the resilience of women, girls and marginalized groups to climate- and pandemic-related shocks and stresses**. Recovery strategies should harness synergies between recovery and green climate mitigation measures by focusing on renewable energies, ecosystem protection, climate-resilient agriculture and climate adaptation in a gender-transformative way and at a scale consistent with the Paris Agreement’s 1.5°C, resilience and finance goals **(Chapter 3)**.
- Too often, economists and humanitarians fail to collect sex- and age-disaggregated data. This leads to women and girls being ‘invisible’ in data collection, a problem that carries through to the analysis and use of data. As a result, policies do not account for the capabilities and needs of women and girls. **All actors should prioritize collecting sex- and age-disaggregated data, use gender analyses to make sense of the findings, and apply those findings in their responses**. Donors should also refuse to fund programs that do not account for the different needs and abilities of different groups, particularly women and girls **(Chapters 2, 5)**.
- The pandemic, with its serious economic repercussions, poses a grave risk to maintaining the quantity and quality of climate, development and humanitarian financing. Using COVID-19 as an excuse to reduce funding levels will exacerbate the effects of the pandemic and forestall global progress. Donors should **mobilize adequate and increased public funding for COVID-19 recovery, alongside continued funding**

24 Halim, Daniel (2020). ‘Women Entrepreneurs Needed - Stat!’ World Bank Blogs. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/women-entrepreneurs-needed-stat>.

25 Demirgüç-Kunt, Asli et al. (2017) ‘The Global Findex Database 2017: Measuring Financial Inclusion and the Fintech Revolution.’ World Bank Group. <https://globalfindex.worldbank.org/>.

for gender-equitable COVID-19 treatment and prevention. Decision-makers should then use this funding to respond to people's needs in ways that honor and increase their agency and resilience, deconstructing and recreating more equitable and sustainable systems. This must include delivering on official development assistance (ODA) and climate finance commitments and redirecting harmful fossil fuel subsidies. Equally, donors and multilateral institutions should hold themselves accountable to ensure that they do not fund any gender-ignorant policies or programs **(Chapters 5, 6).**

- Programs that are essential for many women and girls – such as sexual and reproductive health, or those focused on gender equality and empowerment – are chronically underfunded. Similarly, women-led and/or women/gender-focused organizations, which are often best placed to respond to the needs of women and girls, receive little direct or indirect funding. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these trends and is further imperiling the health, safety, and well-being of women and girls. Donors must **increase the amount of funding that goes to essential programs for women and girls and women-led and/or gender-focused organizations. (Chapter 5).**

These recommendations are not temporary fixes that can be abandoned after the immediate threats of the pandemic have faded. They are necessary now – and permanently. They are a starting point for the systemic changes that are so desperately needed to move beyond rebuilding, towards building forward, and to achieve gender justice and sustainable and equitable systems, once and for all.