COVID-19 Response Strategies, Addressing Digital Gender Divides

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Challenge
The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified gendered structural inequalities. Women and girls are disproportionately impacted due to the compounding of economic and social factors. On average, women earn less, save less, hold less secure jobs, and are more likely to live closer to poverty compared to men. Women are less likely to benefit from paid sick leave, unemployment insurance, and other social protections. Increased exposure to infection, and an escalation in domestic abuse and violence are also reported. Furthermore:

- Women are more likely to work in, or to own small- and medium-enterprises (SMEs) in sectors that have been hardest hit by the pandemic, such as retail, hospitality and food services—sectors that are expected to be slow to recover. In the United States, for example, women comprised 55% of the jobs lost compared to 49% of the total labor force in April 2020. The OECD reports that more than 50% of small- and medium-sized businesses have lost significant revenue and are at risk being out of business in July 2020. These include women-owned and women-led enterprises.

- Women constitute 67% of the global health workforce and the majority of healthcare workers exposed to risk on the frontlines of the crisis.

- Women comprise the majority of low or unpaid care labor, a situation that is aggravated due to closed schools and childcare facilities and shelter-in-place restrictions.

- Shelter-in-place restrictions have left millions of girls and women vulnerable to an increasing shadow pandemic of violence, including cyberviolence, with limited access to help.

- Girls who are unable to attend school during the pandemic are at increased risk of violence at home and early as well as forced marriage, in addition to recruitment into extremist groups.

In response, 106 countries have introduced or adapted COVID-19 social and income protection programs as of April 3, 2020. Alarmingly, few of the COVID-19 relief measures, social assistance (non-contributory transfers), social insurance and supply-side labour
market interventions incorporate gender-based analyses, sex disaggregated data or responses targeting women.

The absence of gender-sensitive COVID-19 response policies and programs risks aggravating and amplifying structural inequalities and undermining progress towards gender equality, socio-economic progress, and the achievement of the UN SDGs.

**Widening digital gender divides**

COVID-19 response policies throw into relief the ways in which many women and girls are disadvantaged due to digital exclusion and the lack of digital equality. Equitable digital engagement is required to ensure women’s full economic engagement, to amplify women’s voices, and to enforce rule of laws that enshrine women’s rights.

Limited access to life-enhancing and life-saving information, mobile banking, microfinance, e-commerce, e-learning, e-agriculture technologies, health services, apps to combat gender-based violence, and social media campaigns to confront stereotypes and to promote political participation is reported. For example, close to half the world’s population—approximately 3.6 billion people—remained offline, in 2019. In developing economies, women comprised 52%, compared to 4% of men who did not use the Internet. In low- and middle-income countries, **433 million women** are unable to connect to the Internet: **165 million fewer women** own a mobile phone compared with men. The EQUALS Global Coalition has warned that, “the digital space is becoming more male-dominated, not less so…”

Digital solutions exist to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on women workers and entrepreneurs. Girls’ and women’s lack of connectivity, access to devices, low literacy and lack of digital skills are significant impediments to benefiting from these and other COVID-19 relief measures:

> “…a stark gender inequality is pervasive in terms of access, ownership of digital devices, digital fluency as well as the capacity to make meaningful use of the access to technology. Even though affordability is a key source of exclusion, there are also significant socio-cultural norms that restrict access for women.”

It is imperative that public and private stakeholders increase women’s and girls’ access to COVID-19 response measures, protect their rights and promote resilience during the crisis and recovery period.

Transformative interventions must include a focus on cultural change and gender-based policy, rather than the narrower focus of current COVID-19 program and financial measures that typically lack accountability for gender inclusion. To not do so infers that women will continue to disproportionately ‘pay the price’ of structural inequalities that are amplified by the pandemic. Substantive change also infers a need to scale interventions that address challenges of the widening gender divides.

**Proposal**

1. Gender must be mainstreamed in all COVID-19 relief and recovery policies. Stakeholders must proactively ensure marketing and distribution of programs are tailored to reach women, as well as men. This includes marginalized learners and professionals, such as people with disabilities and the self-employed who may not easily transition to online and digital platforms.

2. COVID-19 recovery policies must include increased access for girls and women to Internet and mobile technology. Industry, governments, multilateral institutions and the development community must accelerate efforts to address the digital gender gaps including digital skills. Interventions must consider prevailing socio-cultural norms and offer adapted solutions. Provision of hardware and connectivity is not by itself a sufficient solution, given many households prioritize the learning, professional and social needs of boys and men versus the needs of girls and women. Cultural interventions to promote share access to resources is also required.
3. Gender-disaggregated data are crucial for understanding digital gender gaps, informing policy and business decisions to address these gaps, set targets, and track progress. Policy makers and the private sector should review existing gender data and invest in the availability and accuracy of gender-disaggregated data. Improve the availability of gender-disaggregated data, including with respect to the impacts of COVID-19 mobile access and usage.

4. Increased efforts to ensure women have access to affordable, Internet-enabled mobile phones. Investment in education and digital literacy initiatives that increase women’s and girls’ mobile digital literacy—particularly for those that are relevant to shelter-in-place situations is required. Initiatives must address barriers and aspirations in the local context, including access to and use of mobiles. This should include measures to support ‘safe’ learning and working spaces and resources to enable women to seek help, in order to address the escalation in gender-based violence.

5. To address increasing misinformation, suspicion and speculation about the sources, causes and cures of COVID-19, mobile operators should collaborate with health authorities to send messages about safety and sanitation as a precursor to calls made or received.

Illustrative digitally enabled COVID-19 response measures

Gender gaps in digital skills and access to affordable Internet connectivity result in many girls and women being unable to access COVID-19 relief measures. It is imperative to action the above brief recommendations. For illustration:

**Health**

Public and private sector healthcare providers are harnessing digital technology to respond to COVID-19. The UK government, for example, has launched a *coronavirus chatbot* to reduce pressure on the National Health System. The Estonian Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications organized an online *Hack the Crisis* event that motivated the launched of *Suve*, a chatbot to answer pandemic-related questions. In Kenya, Jacaranda Health, a non-profit organization that works to improve maternal and newborns’ health outcomes, expanded its digital health platform *PROMPTS* to ensure women have real-time information and access to care providers. In Kibera, project *Elimu* is mobilizing local shopkeepers to distribute free menstrual hygiene products using text messaging to connect girls and women with local distributors. In Canada, the federal government has committed $170 million (US) to launch an online portal *Wellness Together Canada* in order to expand access to online mental health services. It is predicted that the need for mental health support will be particularly acute among essential frontline healthcare workers—the majority of whom are women.

**Education**

School closures have disrupted education around the world. Where possible, schools, teachers, students and parents have transitioned to remote learning. High-impact, low-cost or free easy-to-use digital technologies and communication tools have been made available, enabling a range of learning solutions. In the United Kingdom, for example, the government has invested £85 million (including the provision of 200,000 laptops), to ensure that disadvantaged children do not fall behind in their education. School boards have adopted strategies that combine the use of Internet, TV, radio, and mobile technologies. Costa Rica has launched a national emergency platform, *aprendo en casa* to provide online educational resources, combined with public media broadcasts for children, parents, and teachers. In Jordan, INJAZ has transformed mandatory in-class courses in secondary schools to digital, televised and radio content, reaching 75 percent of learners. Across Latin America, governments have also sought to support students and families that lack access to the Internet by providing offline educational resources. In Uruguay, where all students in primary and secondary education have access to a computer, the government has focused response efforts on online educational content and pedagogical assistance, providing teachers with a *National Learning Management System*. This enables educators to create their own virtual classroom, improve teaching skills, and access other online educational platforms, such as the national library. In Argentina, the government launched *Seguimos Educando* to broadcast educational...
content for 14 hours a day on TV and 7 hours a day on radio. For students who lack access to technology or connectivity, TV and radio programming are supplemented with ‘notebooks’ packed with learning resources and delivered to students’ homes.

**Gender-based violence (GBV)**

Governments have reported a surge in gender-based violence—the shadow pandemic. Governments have again implemented emergency measures that rely heavily on digital technologies. In France, for example, the Secretariat of Women’s Rights has launched **Arrêtons les violences**, an online platform enabling women to report incidents of violence and talk directly to police officers. This set of measures uses instant messaging services, geolocation functionality, free calls to domestic abuse hotlines, and discreet apps that disguise support and information to survivors in case of surveillance by abusers.

While digital-enabled measures help to prevent gender-based violence and support survivors of violence, many girls and women are deprived access to these potentially lifesaving services because of a lack of access to phones and/or the Internet and limited digital skills. Indeed, there have been urgent calls for the expansion of ICT-enabled support services for at-risk girls and women. This aid includes increasing girls’ and women’s access to mobile technologies and the Internet, providing online helplines and counselling/psychosocial support and other online tools and networks, while expanding the social support of girls and women who do not have access to phones or the Internet.

**Employment and entrepreneurship**

Many initiatives designed to mitigate the fallout of the pandemic, including loss of small business revenue, by deploying online portals. The City of Toronto, for example, has partnered with **Digital Main Street**, to provide free, digital experts to provide support for small businesses and artists. The platform **ShopHere** enables independent retailers, restaurants, and artists to move their businesses online. In Uganda, the start-up Zimba Women has launched an e-commerce platform **ZIMBA MART**, offering women entrepreneurs e-solutions to transition their businesses to online commerce. In Kenya, **Shikilia** (a private-civil sector coalition) utilizes geospatial, demographic and telecommunications data to identify the most economically vulnerable communities and provides emergency mobile cash transfers to these communities. The Government of Pakistan has launched a COVID-19 relief portal, encouraging citizens suffering a loss of livelihoods to register online for emergency financial relief equivalent to $18 (US) per month for three months.

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<th>Digital Gender Divide</th>
<th>Action Strategies</th>
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<td>Front-line, essential workers, unpaid &amp; informal healthcare workers</td>
<td>Girls/women bear disproportionate burdens of unpaid &amp; care work. This hinders participation in labor markets. Facility closures amplify child, elder, personal care demands.</td>
<td>Lack of access to online schooling, information about employment status, wage subsidies, &amp; healthcare &amp; wellness measures</td>
<td>Provision of minimum wage for essential workers &amp; caregivers. Mandate long-term wage subsidies.</td>
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<td>Education &amp; training</td>
<td>Education/training tools &amp; content are not adapted to girls’ &amp; women’s needs. Girls &amp; women are less likely than men to have access to online learning, training, resources, and opportunities.</td>
<td>Enhance access to care systems &amp; expand online health, including mental health services &amp; supports.</td>
<td>Ensure affordable access to ICTs to facilitate online education &amp; training, work, &amp; job sharing. Invest in girls’ &amp; women’s digital skills building.</td>
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<td>Introduce cultural programs to promote equal access to home-based digital tools &amp; connectivity.</td>
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- Ensure flexible work arrangements, for example, split shifts.

- Promote more gender-sensitive online education/training content & tools, including 1-on-1 training in gender issues associated with access and use of ICT.

Gender-based violence (GBV) Increase in harassment, GBV, & exploitation due to isolation, restricted movement.

Increase of online rights abuses & violence.

Lack of or limited access to digital GBV help lines, shelters, counselling, etc.

- Document and communicate economic cost of GBV.

- Designate domestic violence shelters as essential services. Increase funding & other resources to support GBV measures.

- Fund innovative tech-based solutions to prevent & respond to GBV.

- Enhance communication capability to high-risk households and at-risk women.

Immigrant, displaced, refugee, rural, poor, or otherwise marginalized girls and women. Amplified hardship from isolation, abuse, information, & exposure to trafficking or extremist groups. Lack of or limited access to language & culturally appropriate resources.

- Prioritize access to ICTs to disadvantaged groups to enhance safety, welfare, educational, & economic prospects, including job counselling, skills training.


Countries are shifting funds to health priorities. Concurrently, US withdrawal of WHO funding impacts women disproportionately, including dilution of aid to support gender equality & reproductive health. Lack of or limited access to digitally enabled aid.

- Partner with private sector stakeholders to ensure funding, buy-in and monitoring of gender-transformative COVID-19 response.

Unemployment & loss of income Disproportionate impacts on women in terms of income loss & unemployment There remains a lack of access to social & economic safety nets for informal workers. Women’s limited participation in STEM & male-dominated sectors via funding, training, & public sponsorship.

- Affordable ICT infrastructure & digital skills training to enable women to work online and engage in digital business/ entrepreneurship.

- Develop digital talent platforms to promote women’s job transitions & employment opportunities.

- Strengthen labor agencies responsible for digitally re-skilling/ upskilling underemployed & unemployed women.

Women’s enterprise, entrepreneurship, self-employment WEs are more likely to operate in sectors most impacted by COVID-19.

Women-owned enterprises (WEs) are smaller & retain less capital, or capacity to weather the pandemic.
WEs are less likely to employ ICTs to enhance efficiencies.

Given gendered size & sector structures, WEs are less likely to benefit from COVID-19 relief measures (e.g., debt, public procurement opportunities).

- Responses cannot be predicated on assumptions of employment, employer/work relationships. Measures must target informal workers, self-employed, co-operative, micro-enterprise, & small business earners.
- Dedicated funding for accelerator support for women-owned enterprises, particularly within ICT sectors.
- Ensure access to capital for women entrepreneurs, such as no-interest & low-interest loans. Increase social protection for independent workers.

Additional COVID-19 response resources

- A gender-sensitive response is missing from the COVID-19 crisis. (Brookings)
- Why COVID-19 has increased the urgency to reach women with mobile technology. (Global System for Mobile Communications Association)
- Promoting and protecting women’s rights at national level. (Council of Europe)
- Mapping of online articles on Covid-19 and Gender (UNESCO)
- COVID-19 and Women’s Economic Empowerment (Coalition for Women’s Economic Empowerment & Equality) International Center for Research on Women

Endnotes


