

Centering gender equality in legislative responses to the pandemic

As evidenced in the first edition of this joint publication, [COVID-19: The challenge of adapting and strengthening the role of parliaments, an analysis from the Open Parliament perspective](#), legislatures in the Americas and Caribbean region are modifying the physical location and format of parliamentary decision-making in response to COVID-19. Many of the key recommendations presented in that publication for maintaining an open parliament during the pandemic (e.g. through transparency and access to information, accountability, public participation, and ethics and probity) have the potential to likewise result in positive outcomes for gender equality.[1]

As parliamentary institutions adapt their working methods, the ways that parliamentarians are able to engage with an agenda for gender equality are likewise undergoing change, requiring new strategies, creativity, and innovation.

This publication presents **good practices that could promote gender equality by building on and strengthening the different adaptation strategies that parliaments are currently employing in the region.** It also provides examples of how certain parliaments have incorporated a gender perspective in their continuous efforts to respond to COVID-19.

If parliaments' new virtual operations, debates, and decision-making are all approached with gender-responsiveness, it is more likely that the legislative solutions actioned will be effective and sustainable.

If the operations of **parliamentary institutions take into account the pandemic's gender-differentiated impacts on the population, their members are much more likely to be able to effectively carry out their multiple roles.** These roles include overseeing governance to efficiently mitigate the pandemic's unfolding social and economic consequences.

The legislative branch has a critical role to play as the top policymakers of the countries of the Americas and Caribbean grapple with the construction of a “new normal” that aims to protect its citizens and residents from the spread of COVID-19. If parliaments' new virtual operations, debates, and decision-making are all approached with gender-responsiveness, it is more likely that the legislative solutions actioned will be effective and sustainable.

Sources: [1] See, for example: UN Women Americas and Caribbean, “Anti-corruption response to COVID-19 must include women: Transparency International and UN Women call for inclusive, transparent and corruption-free public policies across Latin America and the Caribbean,” 10 June 2020.

Gender and the pandemic

As has been the case around the world, the unfolding realities of the COVID-19 pandemic have been highly gendered in the Americas and the Caribbean region. Women, men, girls, and boys are experiencing the consequences of the pandemic in distinctive ways. The consequences of the pandemic will generally be heightened for women living in poverty and who experience racism; they are part of a large demographic that is at higher risk of infection, loss of income, and disproportionate burdens of care and domestic work.

One of the more visible gender inequalities magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic is women's overrepresentation in essential services, such as health care workers at **70% globally**. [2]. **Women are a majority of many other essential services and jobs in the informal market, where they are less likely to have job security or health insurance, and they may not meet the minimum criteria for government** assistance to help offset the losses caused by COVID-19.

Physical distancing and other government-mandated measures to contain the transmission of COVID-19 are having detrimental effects on women. The unpaid care work women already shoulder is growing as families are spending more time in the home, schools have been closed, and ill family members require care -- all while the usual support systems for distributing these responsibilities are less accessible. The incidence of domestic violence is also increasing, as stay-at-home orders have increased exposure to abusers while limiting victims' ability to safely connect with needed support systems.

Despite the clear gender implications of the pandemic, emerging evidence demonstrates that women's needs and perspectives are not being integrated in crisis decision-making. A survey of 30 countries found that where they existed, national-level committees to respond to COVID-19 had only 24% representation of women. [3]

The functioning and actions of parliaments during this period of crisis should be gender-responsive to avoid further exacerbating inequalities -- and to prevent inadvertently creating new ones. Gender-responsive decision-making can also help to mitigate the costs of COVID-19, and it will lead to benefits for all of society.

Sources: <https://lac.unwomen.org/en/noticias-y-eventos/articulos/2020/06/respuesta-anticorruccion-a-la-covid-debe-ser-transparente>

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

Seizing opportunities for progress

COVID-19 has exposed gender inequalities and other social issues in the region which are long overdue for reform or transformation, and, if addressed strategically, could prevent setbacks and even substantially improve the lives of women and their entire families. Examples of these issues include social protection systems (including pensions, paid sick leave, and [parental leave](#)), sexual and reproductive health, and family-friendly working conditions, among others.

Parliaments and their members can capitalize on the present moment and its disruptions in order to rethink their approaches to ending inequalities, including gender inequality, and be part of “building back better.”

Gender equality advocates across all spheres of work, including in parliament, will appreciate the importance of seizing strategic moments to advance positive change, including periods of rapid reform generated by crises. Indeed, through inter-parliamentary dialogues, legislators have stressed that while the COVID-19 pandemic is exposing and exacerbating their countries’ inequalities and weaknesses, it also provides opportunities to redress injustices in meaningful ways. This is particularly true if a gender perspective is incorporated from the beginning.

Responding through the legislature’s administration

Many of the measures taken to mitigate the social, economic, and environmental consequences of the ongoing crisis are being addressed by enacting emergency State measures. To accommodate these types of measures, parliamentary procedures and practices are being amended to allow for swift voting on budgets and government assistance programs to meet the immediate needs of its people, and to otherwise permit legislative work to continue safely during this situation.

These changes can foster dialogue and incentives to advance related institutional policies that are gender-responsive, aligning with [recommendations](#) to create a more inclusive work environment within the legislature. The permanence of these changes after the crisis passes could generate longer-term benefits for parliamentarians, staff, and the public at large by extension. Examples of such measures within parliaments’ administration and operations are provided below:

- Allowing legislators and staff members who are vulnerable to COVID-19 -- or in contact with someone who is -- to work from home without consequence to their job. This allowance is likely to ease hardship on workers who are also primary caregivers, most often women. (E.g. [Mexico](#))
- Amending standing orders to permit parliamentarians' exceptional need to conduct their deliberations remotely. Additional adjustments to promote greater inclusivity could be considered, for instance, the dress code and use of gender-sensitive language.
- Introducing e-voting, which is considered a good practice for gender-responsive parliaments, especially in geographically large countries. Voting remotely can be particularly beneficial to legislators who are on leave after giving birth or who have caregiving responsibilities. (E.g. [Chile](#)).
- Permitting those who have lost access to child care or maternity leave benefits to continue to work from home. The burdens may otherwise disproportionately impact lower-wage workers and their families.
- Providing equitable access to properly-fitted protective wear (masks, gloves, etc.) to complement physical distancing practices for those present in the legislature. These items can be provided free of cost, or stipends can be considered.
- Establishing or relying on multi-party caucuses to support other legislative efforts; these groups can dedicate their work plans in the short term to questions of gender equality. (E.g. [Mexico](#) and Panama)

Finding personal and professional balance during the COVID-19 pandemic

It is important to recognize that parliamentarians and parliamentary staff are facing new challenges in practicing work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The workloads associated with these already demanding jobs have grown further given greater public need, the transformation of homes into temporary offices, and the interruption of personal and professional support networks.

As workplaces, parliaments can promote healthy work-life balance and self-care as part of gender-responsive actions in the face of the crisis. Prioritizing balance during a crisis can be challenging for parliamentarians and staff, but it also ultimately supports productivity by promoting wellness and helping to prevent burnout.

Some practical strategies that can be implemented and modelled by parliamentary leadership in line with this goal are outlined below:

- **Establishing open lines** of communication between parliamentary leadership, parliamentarians, and staff on ongoing challenges of the current situation and the importance of finding balance, including by unplugging from devices and maintaining connections with friends and family to counteract the downsides of physical distancing.
- **Adopting, communicating, and respecting** set daily work hours that allow for adequate time for rest and fulfilling care responsibilities (especially as these may have increased during the pandemic).
- **Allowing** staff to hold **flexible hours and make use of remote work setups** after COVID-19 restrictions begin to be lifted, as there will likely continue to be challenges associated with care responsibilities.
- **Sharing resources on accessible mental health** and other support services available within the parliament and at the local and national levels.
- **Celebrating and promoting progress** achieved by parliamentarians and at the national level; be sure to visibilize work by women leaders and other diverse community members.

Many of these recommended practices can be maintained after COVID-19 to help to foster an inclusive, accessible, and gender-responsive workplace within the parliament. For additional recommendations, see the IPU resource [Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments](#).

Responding through parliamentary functions

Parliamentarians can defend and advance gender equality through their lawmaking, representation, oversight, and budgeting roles, all of which will take on unique dimensions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

OVERSIGHT

Parliamentarians are responsible for scrutinizing the government's emergency actions to address COVID-19 in order to ensure compliance with their country's laws, constitution, and public needs. Within this work, specific attention can also be paid to whether international standards and agreements for gender equality are being met, and whether political decision-making is participatory and inclusive of the voices of [diverse women](#).

Parliamentarians can additionally provide oversight of the administrative measures being taken by their parliaments to adapt to the realities of governing during COVID-19. They can examine how fellow legislators and staff are impacted by these measures and advocate for the implementation of equitable and compassionate approaches that leave no one behind. Examples of actions that can be taken as part of parliamentary oversight work include:

- Calling for gender parity in the membership of new special committees or task forces that are formed to address the COVID-19 crisis, whether inside or outside of the parliament. It is critical for these committees to benefit from women's lived experience and professional expertise in sectors such as public health, social services, disaster response, and financial management.
- Reviewing the profile of recipients of proposed economic reliefs and assessing whether different vulnerable groups will be able to benefit equitably. Empirical data, evaluation reports, and gender analyses produced from any similar government programs are all tools to support in this review. If the available data is not disaggregated by gender, race, age, and other relevant variables, parliamentarians can use the occasion to call for its collection.
- Monitoring women's representation within the legislature if physical distancing measures are implemented to reduce the number of people in the parliament's chambers at any time. Political party representation is likely a primary consideration for reduced-member sittings, but gender and other characteristics will also help to achieve balanced representation in parliamentary sittings. These will be specific to each country, but could include geography and language.

- Ensuring that electoral processes are safe and inclusive (including for those who do not have reliable internet access) and that women's political rights are upheld during COVID-19. Parliamentarians can assess, among other things, whether marginalized groups are accessing voting information from electoral bodies, and whether gender quotas are being implemented appropriately.

LAWMAKING

The matters on the legislative agenda during the COVID-19 pandemic will naturally be focused on shaping and swiftly funding governments' actions to respond to the immediate public health and economic crises. The gender-responsiveness of these government actions will play a crucial role in their success. Specific examples of centering gender equality perspectives in legislative work during COVID-19 include:

- **Placing gender equality and women's rights issues on the agendas** of special committees on the COVID-19 pandemic. In Argentina, a bill was drafted which would guarantee the application of a gender perspective in crisis committees. Practical tools for reviewing proposed legislation with a gender lens could be used or introduced to support parliamentarians' efforts in this regard.
- **Delivering contributions in plenary that reflect gender equality work** done in committees, or that otherwise focus on the gendered implications of the COVID-19 crisis. In [Canada](#), topics raised in the House of Commons have included increased rates of domestic violence and the disproportionate burdens of childcare that are falling on women.
- **Presenting fast-tracked legislation** that specifically aims to increase women's access to essential government programs and funding during the pandemic. In [Chile](#), a bill is being reviewed that would extend maternity leave protections during the pandemic. This bill, responding to a gender-specific need, was able to advance in part because the parliamentary committee responsible for gender equality has continued to meet during the pandemic.
- **Introducing legal reforms that fill gaps in social protection** that have been revealed during the pandemic. Some of the temporary supports implemented (or variations of these) could offer long-term benefits for the public if permanently adopted. Support for [working parents](#), essential service workers, small business owners, or other groups vulnerable to social and economic shocks during crises could strengthen social safety nets and reduce the impact of shocks for these groups over time.

REPRESENTATION

Parliamentarians hold the key responsibilities of giving voice to the diverse needs of members of the public in decision-making spaces, and of ensuring that legislative outputs are efficient and responsive to those needs. This is especially critical during COVID-19, as needs are heightened and different for all members of the public, yet traditional avenues of consultation may not be available.

Parliamentarians can proactively seek out the perspectives of women across the country and lead discussions in the legislature on gender equality issues affecting their communities. These perspectives should then be reflected in the decisions taken in response to the pandemic, with the public kept apprised throughout the process. Some examples of mechanisms for doing so include:

- **Sharing information on the gendered** implications of COVID-19 (domestic violence, care work) and measures to respond to these on personal social media accounts and those associated with the parliament. The Congress of Colombia's Bicameral Committee on Equity for Women, for example, used their social media channels to promote virtual [discussions](#) about the problem of domestic violence and [campaigns](#) to end it. These actions will increase public access to information on important measures being taken nationally and locally and can create avenues for further conversation.
- **Making use of videoconferencing platforms** to hold virtual town hall meetings and consult community-led women's organizations on their experiences during COVID-19 to inform legislative work. Parliamentary committees functioning during this period can also use videoconferencing to invite representatives from local women's organizations and other gender equality specialists to deliver expert testimony during their meetings. As all issues related to COVID-19 have a gender component, this recommendation can be adopted by all committees, and not only those with a specific gender equality mandate.
- **Consulting with national gender machineries and/or gender** technical units within the parliament can help to build understanding about the differentiated impacts of COVID-19 in the country. These institutions can likely also connect decisionmakers with local women's organizations to facilitate further conversations.

BUDGETING

In response to the immense economic impacts of COVID-19, many governments have implemented new programs that provide emergency funding support to individuals and businesses. As budgets are statements of priorities, parliamentarians deliberate, vote, and provide oversight to these measures. They can ask about the decision making processes, and consider whether the relief measures are well suited to those most affected by the ongoing crisis. Specific examples of how this work can be conducted are outlined below:

- Applying learning from research and consultations with the public and women's organizations when analyzing finance measures as well as legislation. To prevent further growth in inequality, effective budgetary measures should take into consideration the different needs and vulnerabilities of members of the population.
- Hosting virtual meetings between the legislature (in plenary or with particular committees) and the Minister of Finance -- and other members of the executive -- to create an opportunity for parliamentarians to ask questions about the ways in which gender inequalities have been taken into account when prioritizing policy issues and allocating resources during the pandemic. This builds on existing meeting structures already in place in the legislatures of [Argentina](#), [Colombia](#), [Ecuador](#), and [Jamaica](#), among others.
- Advocating for the implementation of census and budgetary practices that accurately measure and value women's unpaid care work, which has been made more visible during the pandemic, in national accounting. This labour has significant value for the functioning of families and national economies, but is most often underrecognized and undervalued. Capturing this in national accounting figures will facilitate greater understanding of women's work and the development of appropriate support measures for redistribution within the household and with the state. [Costa Rica](#) is an example of a country with this practice in place, enabled by legislation.

Resources

Applegate, Meredith, "How to Protect Gender Equality in Elections during COVID-19," International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), 28 April 2020.

Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Gender and COVID-19: A guidance note for parliaments," 2020.

International IDEA, "Parliaments and Crisis: Challenges and Innovations: Parliamentary Primer No.1," 2020.

UN Women Americas and the Caribbean Regional Office, "COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean: How to Incorporate Women and Gender Equality in the Management of the Crisis Response," 2020.