

Gender mainstreaming in the COVID-19 policy response

Fostering equality during the pandemic and beyond

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CIPPEC (Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth) is an independent, non-partisan, nonprofit organization that works for a just, democratic, and efficient state that improves people's lives. To this end, it concentrates its efforts on analysing and promoting public policies that foster equity and growth in Argentina. Known for the high qualification of its staff, CIPPEC has become one of the most recognized and respected public policy think tanks in the region.

THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON GENDER GAPS

The COVID-19 crisis brought to the forefront the prevalence of profound inequalities worldwide. In a context of intermittent lockdowns, economic crisis, and sanitary uncertainty, the pandemic is widening the gaps, as the most underprivileged populations register income declines and increased health and social risks.¹

Gender inequalities are no exception: While women already faced greater obstacles to their autonomy,² the emergency exacerbated disparities. The pandemic worsened the gender-poverty gap amid job losses and weak social protection.³ In 2021, for every 100 men living in poverty, there will be 118 women in the same position. This gap is even larger for young women and some territories, such as Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.⁴ In contrast to previous crises, this time, women retreated more frequently from the labor market, which affected their access to resources and well-being. Women are concentrated in sectors that are more threatened by the crisis, such as tourism, food services and domestic work, and they are overrepresented in the informal economy, where incomes decreased 60% during the first outbreak.⁵ Consequently, women face higher job loss rates than their male counterparts, with their employment being 19% more at risk.⁶ Moreover, the pandemic unveiled how crucial care work is to sustain life, but its recognition did not imply a more equitable distribution of these tasks.⁷ Because of the feminization of care, women are on the front line to contain the outbreak and maintain communities' well-being.⁸ Inside the household, they became responsible for the increased

unpaid care workload that followed lockdowns, remote working, and school closures. While 49% and 37% of women reported an increase in the time spent on cleaning and childcare, respectively, only 33% and 26% of men did.⁹ This phenomenon implied a re-familiarisation of care that enforced time restrictions on women, affecting their economic autonomy, access to working and educational opportunities, and mental health.¹⁰ Additionally, stay-at-home policies implied higher risks of gender violence for girls and women, as suggested by the rise in domestic violence calls.¹¹ Secondly, outside the household, women represent more than 70% of the workforce in healthcare and social services¹² – considered essential during the pandemic, which increased their exposure to infection.

The differential impact of the crisis on women implies a strong deprivation of their rights and an obstacle towards achieving the 2030 Agenda. Therefore, gender must be considered a key variable in the policy response for recovery.

While the pandemic is responsible for increasing the gaps, it also presents an opportunity to promote new approaches to policy. The breakdown of previous patterns creates a sense of exception that is a fertile ground for structural changes that otherwise would be resisted, such as gender mainstreaming. Thus, crises can be windows of opportunity to unleash the transformative potential of these approaches in the long term. The pandemic's socioeconomic consequences call for a comprehensive, intersectional and gender-sensitive policy response that is people-centred, addressing the current crisis, the recovery, and the aftermath.

GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN POLICY RESPONSE

In our societies, men, women and non-binary individuals face diverse opportunities and impediments to developing their full potential. Power relations are based on a system of beliefs, constructions and sociocultural representations that assign different roles, expectations and behaviors to individuals depending on their sex and gender.¹³ Therefore, adopting a gender lens in policymaking becomes crucial to achieving gender equality in times of increasing social risks.¹⁴ By mainstreaming gender, institutions value the implications of their actions for men and women. This strategy identifies and considers gendered experiences and outcomes in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all policies.¹⁵ The systemic efforts involved in gender mainstreaming become a tool for institutions and states to guarantee equality of treatment and opportunity and no discrimination.¹⁶ The goal is to stop reproducing disparities and achieve gender equality.

While gender mainstreaming might be a challenging endeavor, embracing a strategic and targeted approach is critical to bring positive results.¹⁷ During the COVID-19 crisis, holistic and gender-sensitive policy responses have become particularly relevant to rethinking gender norms and leave no one behind.

Many governments have striven to incorporate gender in their COVID-19 policy responses. Such is the case of Spain, where gender equality is one of the four cross-cutting pillars in the Recovery Plan España Puede.¹⁸ In the same vein, at the subnational level, Hawaii became the first place in the world to approve legislation

on a feminist recovery plan.¹⁹ These approaches could shape more inclusive and resilient societies, planting the seed for a long-term approach to policy with a gender lens. Yet around the world, most measures and recovery strategies are gender-blind: According to UN Women, only 20% of the labor market and social protection response policies includes a gender perspective.

»While women already faced greater obstacles towards their economic autonomy, the emergency exacerbated disparities.«

The road towards a new normal requires a holistic strategy that reframes traditional policy-making processes and addresses the consequences of the pandemic from a gender lens. In this section, we outline three crucial steps to ensure a gender perspective in the COVID-19 policy response: generating diagnoses with gender-disaggregated data; reviewing existing and prospective policies from a gender perspective; and implementing gender budgeting. Also, we propose a fourth step regarding the political and institutional articulation of the strategy to

ensure a comprehensive programmatic offer.

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1. Gender disaggregated diagnoses: Opening data to close the gaps

The first year of the pandemic has amplified inequalities. Evidence suggests that women and girls have been severely affected, with direct implications for their autonomy. The full extent of these im-

pacts, however, remains largely unknown due to incomplete or unavailable information. By February 2021, only 50% of countries reported sex-disaggregated data on epidemiological indicators and no country considered the disease's incidence on transgender and non-binary individuals.²⁰ Also, data collection on socioeconomic indicators was compromised in many countries: Outside Europe, face-to-face interviews are the main survey mode and they experienced pauses due to lockdown measures.²¹ Even before the pandemic, on average, countries regularly reported on only 31% of gender-specific SDG indicators.²² In this context, producing, collecting, using and disseminating gender-disaggregated data is a precondition to designing, implementing and assessing gender-responsive policy strategies. Making quality and updated statistics available will help to better address the effects of the pandemic, foster socioeconomic recovery and build resilient societies. In this sense, collecting gender-disaggregated data is a means towards the end of implementing better policies and assessing their results.

To disentangle the existence of compounding inequalities, data production must adopt an intersectional approach. Intersectionality allows the analysis of socioeconomic and demographic characteristics that overlap and interact with gender, making disparities visible. This lens avoids gender blind interventions that do not cater to the needs of specific groups.

The design of data collection schemes, instruments and processes could benefit from participatory instances that gather relevant stakeholders. This process would contribute to co-creating solutions, unify definitions, and ensure that data is valu-

able to making comprehensive diagnoses and informing inclusive policies. Multilateral institutions can play a crucial role in supporting capacity building in data production and foster standardization.

Globally, UN Women's Rapid Gender Assessment Surveys on the impacts of COVID-19 are a good example of tools used to produce gender-disaggregated diagnoses. These surveys, implemented in partnership with national governments, have proven vital to fill knowledge gaps as a complement to official statistics and informed policy responses in more than 60 countries, such as Thailand, Jordan, Mexico or Ukraine.²³

2. Policy review: Analyzing laws and regulations from a gender lens

The COVID-19 crisis has had consequences in multiple dimensions affecting people's well-being. Nonetheless, policies have been scattered in terms of responding to the needs of specific populations. According to the COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker, by September 2020, less than 40% of the response policies implemented worldwide were gender-sensitive, generally addressing gender-based violence.²⁴ This context reveals an uneven and insufficient approach to guaranteeing women's rights.

Gender-sensitive diagnoses are critical to identify the most pressing matters and redefine the objectives of a robust policy response. This approach involves determining the priority interventions to tackle challenges and systemic issues from a gender perspective. As such, it is crucial to strengthen policymaking, starting from the design and implementation of new policies to the monitoring and evaluation of existing interventions.

The City of Buenos Aires (Argentina) provides an interesting experience. Based on information from the System of Gender Indicators, the local government analyzed the gendered effects of the pandemic. This diagnosis informed the design of a gender-sensitive and intersectional response and recovery plan. To this end, the strategy revised ongoing policies, filled gaps, and identified potential synergies among interventions to maximize impact.

Mainstreaming gender into ongoing COVID-19 response strategies implies a full analysis of policies, laws and regulations that have been implemented, adapted or scaled up during the pandemic to identify programmatic voids and overlaps, as well as to determine challenges and opportunities to apply a gender lens. One possibility is to employ gender impact assessments tools, which prove valuable in identifying gender impacts throughout the policy cycle and create a baseline for future analysis.²⁵ To succeed in this endeavor, political support at the highest level of government becomes a sine qua non condition. At the same time, gender expertise is necessary to identify potential gender blindness and unintended effects.

3. Gender budgeting: Ensuring resources to close the gaps

In any given society, resource allocation reveals priorities. Without a gender and rights perspective in budgeting, efforts to foster gender equality during the pandemic would be undermined. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, more than 80 countries had undertaken gender budgeting efforts.²⁶ This share still leaves more than half of the world behind and, in several

countries, creates challenges in terms of effective implementation.

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Gender budgeting identifies the differentiated effects of all government expenditures and, thus, the progress and setbacks for gender equality.²⁷ This type of analysis has different approaches and can be applied to objectives, financial allocations, programs, or other stages of the budget cycle, both ex-ante and ex-post. The

OECD identifies three core elements for an efficient gender budgeting: (1) a sound strategy for gender equality supported by a strong political commitment and leadership; (2) effective tools of implementation according to the selected approach; and (3) a supportive enabling environment that includes gender-sensitive data and training.²⁸ In Canada, gender budgeting has been a crucial component of federal budget-making for the last three years, including a Gender Based Analysis (GBA+) for new budget measures. During the pandemic, the government assessed the potential and differential effects of all COVID-19 policies and resource allocations on diverse groups of men and women.²⁹ In the developing world, Rwanda, a country recognized for the high presence of women in public leadership, has also incorporated gender mainstreaming in budget planning during the current fiscal year. These experiences can provide lessons for other countries to follow.

4. Leveraging political support to foster action

Gender mainstreaming implies governments' systematic, comprehensive, and long-term efforts throughout the policy-making process. While involving diverse public stakeholders, it may be easily sidelined when confronted with other agendas. Thus, it is necessary to count on high-level political support and define a leading authority to supervise the whole gender mainstreaming initiative.³⁰ Women's participation in this process is crucial; during the first year of the pandemic, however, they represented only 24% of members in 225 COVID-19 taskforces created in 137 countries around the world.³¹

The characteristics of such an entity will depend on each context and can change over time. While some countries have created a specific ministry like Chile and Nicaragua, others have opted for secretariats of state, national institutes or federal departments, like Canada, or institutes based in other ministries, like Uruguay.³² Additionally, over the last years, many countries have modified their gender institutions, raising their position in the hierarchy; this is the case in Spain, France and Argentina. Despite the bureaucratic organization, it is important for such institutions to be gender diverse and apply a gender-lens while being empowered to enforce and promote gender mainstreaming in other agencies.³³ Besides the coordination of the gender mainstreaming initiative, the institution can be responsible for other tasks. These activities include identifying, communicating and evaluating objectives, targets, and interventions; coordinating with the budgeting authority; and promoting synergies between different areas.³⁴ Multilateral networks, such

as the G20, can play a vital role as platforms for peer learning and sharing best practices.

CONCLUSION

The coronavirus pandemic rapidly transformed the way we interact, work, produce and reproduce. It is still too early to delineate the long-term consequences, but one conclusion is clear: In an unequal world, the crisis is widening disparities and reverting progress in gender equality globally. This is not only detrimental to the exercise of rights of girls and women but also hampers achieving sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda.

The COVID-19 crisis, however, can also become an opportunity. The transformative nature of the pandemic is creating a new normal in which gender should become an imperative variable in policy-making. Adopting this strategy during the pandemic and beyond will be critical to building more resilient societies that are better prepared for future challenges and that leave no one behind.

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