

Virtual Townhall Meeting of Civil Society and United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres

In light of the COVID-19 crisis

Moderated by UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

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As in all crisis, women's civil society organizations have been at the front line of response to the COVID-19 pandemic, promoting life-saving information and public health messaging, building institutional trust and community resilience, and helping inform and engage marginalized communities. Hearing their perspectives is critical to informing effective response and recovery. Young women are particularly impacted, from education to job opportunities. They have also been those at the forefront of calling for a recovery that is more inclusive, equal, climate just and resilient.

Owing to the cancellation of **the Commission on the Status of Women** earlier this year, the Secretary-General's annual consultation with women's civil society was postponed. The virtual townhall provided an opportunity in this moment for women's civil society organization to engage with the Secretary-General on the issue of the COVID-19 crisis, sharing their experiences of the impact of the pandemic and their recommendations to the UN in addressing the crisis and building back better, as well as its role in protecting and promoting women's rights and agency within this new context. The meeting also took place as the UN is commemorating its **75th anniversary**, providing a further opportunity to share thoughts on the future of the Organization and multilateralism.

Background

The year 2020, marking the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action and the 20 year anniversary of the Security Council's women, peace and security agenda, was intended to be ground-breaking for gender-equality. Instead, with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, fragile gains of the past decades are at risk of being rolled back. The pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems which are in turn amplifying the impacts of the pandemic. Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex.

Economically, women have less of a buffer to the impacts of the pandemic as they already earn less, save less, are more likely to be in or near poverty, and comprise the vast majority of employees in insecure jobs worldwide.

Women are the majority of frontline health and essential workers as well as those employed in the sectors worst hit by closures. As the pandemic and measures to mitigate it have spread, there has been a sharp increase in reported cases of violence against women in all regions. And with movement restrictions and the closure of schools, the number of hours women are spending on domestic and care work has increased exponentially. Reprioritization and reallocation of resources has also left women with limited access to justice and sexual and reproductive health services. All of these impacts are further amplified in contexts of fragility, conflict, and emergencies where social cohesion is already undermined and institutional capacity and services are limited.

Despite the devastation of this crisis, there are also seeds of opportunity. While too few women are in positions of leadership globally, there has been increased attention to the values and effectiveness of female leaders in responding to the crisis. And while movement restrictions have restricted the ability of civil society to gather and engage, the shift to life online has opened opportunities to hear from and engage new voices and dialogue across actors who may otherwise not gather face to face.

As in all crises, women's civil society organizations have been at the front line of response, spreading accurate and life-saving information and public health messaging, building institutional trust and community resilience, and helping inform and engage marginalized communities.

Martine Gayon

UN Representative, New York