

## Strategic inter-parliamentary dialogue

### Gender-responsive recovery post COVID-19

*Hosted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and organized jointly with UN Women*

**Women's economic empowerment: virtual, 7 April 2021**

#### Context and rationale

The impacts of crises are never gender neutral, and COVID-19 is no exception. Beyond the public health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a full-fledged economic and social crisis. Rampant inequalities have once again been revealed and further exacerbated. A recent report by UN Women<sup>1</sup> outlined that women and girls have felt the economic and social fallout of the pandemic particularly harshly, as they are more vulnerable in hard-hit economic sectors. Lockdown measures and economic pressure have also further amplified violence against women and girls (VAWG) – the shadow pandemic.

Two roadmaps for action continue to be relevant: the Beijing Platform for Action (adopted 1995), which is the global blueprint for gender equality; and the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (adopted 2015). It is now more crucial than ever to achieve them both. Without coordinated action to mitigate the gendered impacts of COVID-19, the fragile gender equality gains of the past 25 years risk being lost.

Through coordinated action, parliaments are in a unique position to: contribute to the political will needed to enact gender-responsive legislation; oversee government action and resource allocation; and mobilize society in its gender-responsive recovery.

#### Prioritizing women's economic empowerment

Women typically earn less and have less secure jobs than men. With plummeting economic activity, women are particularly vulnerable to layoffs and loss of livelihood. The income of women working in the informal sector has declined dramatically. In the first month of the pandemic, informal workers worldwide lost an estimated average of 60 per cent of their income. Some of the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic are feminized. They tend to be low-paid, with poor working conditions and few basic worker protections, such as paid sick and family leave.<sup>2</sup>

Women on the front lines are more affected by COVID-19, and too many of them are sacrificing their health for economic security. Seventy per cent of the world's health and social care workforce are women. They are also more likely to be frontline health professionals, especially nurses, midwives and community health workers.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UN Women, [From insights to action: Gender equality in the wake of COVID-19](https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/09/gender-equality-in-the-wake-of-covid-19) (Geneva, 2020a): [www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/09/gender-equality-in-the-wake-of-covid-19](https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/09/gender-equality-in-the-wake-of-covid-19).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Women's lesser access to land, financial capital and other assets makes it harder for them to weather a crisis, bounce back and rebuild their small businesses. Emerging evidence from UN Women's rapid gender-assessment surveys in Europe and Central Asia highlights the impacts of the pandemic on self-employed women and men. While men are more likely to see their working hours reduced (54% of men vs. 50% of women), more women have lost their jobs or businesses as a result of COVID-19 (25% of women vs. 21% of men).<sup>4</sup>

The impacts of COVID-19 are, and will continue to be, felt most harshly by women already living in difficult and/or disadvantaged circumstances. Such women include (but are not limited to): refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, migrants, women with disabilities, those living with chronic health conditions, and adolescent girls and young women who already suffer from gender-based inequalities.

A gender-aware response to COVID-19 requires greater support and social protection for women workers.

## Objectives

The strategic dialogue aimed to:

- Build knowledge and a common understanding among parliamentarians from different countries and genders about the impact of COVID-19 on the advancement of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls globally.
- Identify parliamentary legislative, oversight and budgetary actions focused on gender-responsive recovery policies and strategies.
- Support peer to peer exchanges of experience, good practices, lessons learned and advice, so as to establish common strategies for parliamentary action.
- Inspire work in parliament aimed at a more gender-responsive recovery, with due consideration of different national contexts and specific needs.
- Support the implementation of international commitments, including the Beijing Declaration, the Sustainable Development Goals, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and Conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO), such as the recently adopted Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) on the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work, including gender-based violence, supplemented by Recommendation No. 206 on violence and harassment.
- Contribute, via the Bureau and Forum of Women Parliamentarians and other IPU bodies, to mainstreaming gender equality in the deliberations and decisions of the 142nd IPU Assembly (24–27 May 2021), which was to focus on the impact of the pandemic.
- Contribute a parliamentary perspective to global processes and initiatives, such as the Generation Equality Forum, and *Equality in law for women and girls by 2030*, a UN Women multi-stakeholder strategy.

The first strategic dialogue, on women's economic empowerment, took place on 7 April 2021. It was chaired by Ms. **Hoda Al-Helaissi** (Saudi Arabia), Member of the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians. The panellists were: Ms. **Antra Bhatt**, Statistics Specialist, Research and Data Section, UN Women; Ms. **Anam Parvez**, Gender Justice Research Lead and Policy Adviser, Evidence Team, Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (OXFAM); Ms. **Stefania Fabricio**, Deputy Unit Chief, Strategy, Policy and Review Department, International Monetary Fund (IMF); and Ms. **Emanuela Pozzan**, Senior Gender Equality and Non-discrimination Specialist, ILO. It was moderated by Ms. **Ana**

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

**Saldarriaga**, Deputy Head, Global Shapers Community and Lead, Impact and Operations, World Economic Forum. There were 172 participants, including 65 parliamentarians.

## Report

**Ms. Hoda Al-Helaissi** (Saudi Arabia, Member of the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians) emphasized that women's economic empowerment was a critical issue that must be addressed as a priority. Even before COVID-19, women had earned less and had held less secure jobs than men. In all, 740 million women earned their living in informal economies, characterized by low pay, poor working conditions and few basic protections.<sup>5</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic had worsened an existing economic imbalance between men and women. It had created a full-fledged economic and social crisis. Worldwide, informal workers had lost an average of 60 per cent of their income. Women had lost their jobs or businesses, while unpaid care and domestic work had increased.

"A COVID-19 response strategy that does not take gender equality into account will not be sustainable."

**Ms. Hoda Al-Helaissi** (Saudi Arabia),  
Member of the IPU Bureau of Women  
Parliamentarians

She called on parliaments to contribute to a gender-responsive post-COVID-19 recovery, and advised them to:

- Use universal social protection to cater to the needs of women, including unemployment and retirement benefits, and maternity leave.
- Compensate women taking care of children, older people and families.
- Provide access to affordable and quality childcare services.

## A research and evidence-based briefing about the economic impact of COVID-19 on women

### Overview

In the first section, panellists presented data about the economic impacts of COVID-19 on women workers, women refugees, migrants, informal workers, and women without internet access or digital literacy skills. They emphasized how COVID-19 had disrupted data collection, which informed the position and challenges of women within the pandemic. They presented country-specific examples on the topic, and proposed solutions that could mitigate women's economic inequalities during and after COVID-19.

**Ms. Antra Bhatt** (Statistics Specialist, Research and Data Section, UN Women) said that, during COVID-19, data collection had been disrupted, which had decreased specific information about the economic impacts of COVID-19 on women. However, the ILO had reported that women had been impacted at a higher rate than men. And the situation was going from bad to worse. In 2020, employment losses for women had been at 5 per cent compared to 3.9 per cent for men. In Latin America, the number of women outside the labour force had risen to 83 million compared to 40 million in 2020. Globally, around 510 million women worked in hard-hit sectors, such as accommodation, food services, wholesale and retail.<sup>6</sup> That equated to 40 per cent of employed women, compared to 36.6 per cent of employed men.

The decline of women in the workforce during COVID-19 had been particularly linked to their expectations as unpaid caregivers. In the **US**, one in four women had lost their jobs due to household

<sup>5</sup> ILO (2018): [www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_627189/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_627189/lang-en/index.htm).

<sup>6</sup> UN Women (2020b): [www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/9/feature-covid-19-economic-impacts-on-women](https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/9/feature-covid-19-economic-impacts-on-women).

responsibilities. This was twice the rate of men. In **Brazil, Chile and Costa Rica**, the sharpest pandemic-related drops in labour force participation had been seen among women with young children.

The pandemic had therefore revealed:

- The importance of support to care arrangements.
- That the care sector needed a respected workforce and long-term investments in its structures and systems.
- That governments must develop measures to address the economic fallout experienced by women during the pandemic. Fewer measures had been directed to supporting families and women in unpaid work.

**Ms. Anam Parvez** (Gender Justice Research Lead and Policy Adviser, Evidence Team, OXFAM) focused on the impact of COVID-19 on women refugees, migrant workers, informal workers, and women without internet access or digital literacy skills. Women from these groups had been hit especially hard, as they lived in poverty and were from marginalized groups.

During COVID-19, in low and middle-income countries, 50 per cent of workers were living on poor wages, with no access to unemployment benefits or sick pay. The number of people living on less than US\$ 5.5 per day had also increased by half a billion.<sup>7</sup>

Informal women workers from racialized minority groups and migrants made up a huge percentage of that group. They were excluded from social protection schemes, denied access to credit, and overlooked by pandemic relief and recovery packages, which had prioritized workers with formal contracts and permanent jobs.

“If women were represented at the same rate as men in hard-hit sectors, 112 million women would not be at high risk of losing their income or job.”

**Ms. Anam Parvez**, Gender Justice Research Lead and Policy Adviser, Evidence Team, OXFAM

In **Italy**, for example, 72 per cent of care workers were foreign born. However, they had been excluded from COVID responses. In **Asia Pacific**, only three countries had included non-citizens in their pandemic preparedness plans.

Reasons why COVID-19 had disproportionately impacted women more than men included that:

- Women made up 70 per cent of the health and social care workforce, but they were undervalued, poorly paid and poorly protected.
- Migrant women and women from racialized communities were concentrated in informal employment with zero-hours contracts, and no option to work from home or take leave to protect themselves.
- Unpaid care responsibilities had increased for women. Even before COVID-19, women did 12.5 billion hours of unpaid care work every day.<sup>8</sup> In countries all over the world, less than 6 per cent of COVID-19 response measures addressed unpaid care work.

To increase women’s economic empowerment during and after COVID-19:

- Women must be educated on ways to climb out of poverty.
- Girls must continue their education and must not be forced to focus entirely on household chores. Currently, two thirds of girls were doing more household chores than before the pandemic, and over half were spending more time caring for siblings.

<sup>7</sup> The World Bank (2018): [www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/10/17/nearly-half-the-world-lives-on-less-than-550-a-day](http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/10/17/nearly-half-the-world-lives-on-less-than-550-a-day); Oxfam (2020): [www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/half-billion-people-could-be-pushed-poverty-coronavirus-warns-oxfam](http://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/half-billion-people-could-be-pushed-poverty-coronavirus-warns-oxfam).

<sup>8</sup> Oxfam (2021): [www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/covid-19-cost-women-globally-over-800-billion-lost-income-one-year](http://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/covid-19-cost-women-globally-over-800-billion-lost-income-one-year).

- Girls must continue to have access to distance learning. In **Latin America and the Caribbean**, only 30 per cent of children from poor families had access to a computer, compared with 95 per cent of children from rich families.

## Moderated discussion

### Overview

After the sessions, the floor was opened for interventions from participants. MPs from around the world made comments on the topic, shared good gender-responsive measures taken in their countries to tackle women's economic empowerment, and gave further solutions and answers to the questions: What are the biggest threats/challenges related to COVID-19 and its impact on women's economic empowerment? How is COVID-19 affecting vulnerable groups of women in particular? What recent legislation has your government or parliament adopted to improve the economic status of women? What other measures have been implemented in your country?

In **Bangladesh**, a large percentage of marginalized women were in the informal labour sector. Due to the pandemic, demand from global markets had reduced, leaving those women without work. The Government had developed safety net packages to address layoffs. However, that was not a permanent solution. To develop permanent/long-term answers, the Government should seek collaborative solutions with the corporate sector and civil society, as they all had a responsibility to ensure the economic empowerment of women.

In **Syria**, 23 projects had been developed in 2021 for the economic empowerment of rural women. A programme had also been created, which included a fund for the social assistance of rural women. However, the small and medium-sized enterprise sector, which included a huge percentage of women, had been hit hard by the pandemic. Solutions to mitigate the economic inequality of women should therefore include:

- Assistance from UN Women to feminist groups, NGOs and women organizations. That could help women gain sustainable access to the labour market and other markets.
- The lifting of economic sanctions on Syria, as they were having a negative impact on women.

In **Turkey**, the Government had developed incentives that allowed women flexible working hours and the ability to work from home. The Government had also continued to pay businesses to retain that incentive.

In **Ireland**, there had been a gender pay gap of 14.4 per cent in November 2019. Due to the pandemic, the gap had increased by 2 per cent as more women became unemployed. In 2021, the Government had passed the Gender Pay Gap Information Bill, which required businesses to publish information about salaries paid to men and women. The law would ensure transparency in the workplace, and would work to address women's economic inequality. Twenty-five per cent of women in essential work also came from immigrant backgrounds and did not have official status. As a result, work was currently under way to ensure a fast track to citizenship. On pension plans, work was also ongoing to ensure a level playing field for women.

In **Cyprus**, there was a need to find solutions on the economic empowerment of women. Parliaments must therefore:

- Show determination and a strong will to support working women.
- Develop structures and programmes that supported women.
- Focus on education with solidarity, equality and respect at its core.
- Ensure that all decisions made were based on gender mainstreaming.
- Have full wage transparency in companies.

- Put women MPs at the forefront of initiatives that supported equality, women and society.

In the **Philippines**, Parliament had given stimulus packages to citizens. Members of the House of Representatives Committee on Women and Gender Equality had filed a Bill, *An Act to ensure gender-responsive and inclusive protocols and programming to address the gender-differentiated needs of women during COVID-19 and other public health concerns, emergencies and disasters*. In May 2021, in partnership with the Philippine Commission on Women, a handbook was also to be launched on how to be a gender-responsive legislator.

In **Qatar**, the Government did not differentiate between women and men. Both sexes received equal treatment from the Government in terms of social and medical provision. However, women working in hospitals, and mothers working at home and doing domestic work continued to be economically affected. As mitigations, Qatar had implemented a fund worth 57 billion Qatari riyals, postponed all bank debts, exempted exported products from tariffs, and improved family work policies. However, the Government must continue to promote positive human resource policies that supported COVID-19 restrictions, and to finance formal and informal businesses to ensure stability during the pandemic.

In **Canada**, twice as many calls had been received from women facing gender-based violence during the pandemic compared to before the crisis. Every month, shelters turned away around 19,000 women and girls. Women were also struggling with new and additional burdens due to increased domestic work and helping children with online learning at home. The House of Commons had consequently concluded that a basic income was necessary for women to reintegrate into the workforce after COVID-19. A recovery fund of US\$ 100 million had therefore been set up to help women in need through projects that would improve their economic status, and their social, democratic and political life.

In the **United Kingdom**, LGBTQ+ women had been excluded. Conversations were needed on their inclusion and around intersectionality. Since the start of the pandemic, telemedicine had also provided women with continued access to, for example, abortion care for up to 10 weeks. Consultations were done by phone, which had been extremely helpful to women in vulnerable groups. Through the system, trafficked women and women in situations of domestic violence had been discovered and assisted. Currently, the Government was also working to simplify access to contraception in pharmacies.

In **Madagascar**, women were facing difficult situations due to the patriarchal nature of society. They could not be spokespeople, did not have their own voice, and were being manipulated by men. However, women were also becoming more active and developing social initiatives that supported women.

## Solutions, policy guidance and the role of MPs

### Overview

Panellists outlined parliamentary priorities for the coming months and years. They gave examples of transformative actions that MPs could lead or contribute to in promoting, sustaining and strengthening women in the economy. They answered the questions: What are the potential long-term effects on gender equality of the economic fallout? What economic fallout have women experienced around the world? What role do fiscal policies play in promoting gender equality? What have governments done to address gendered economic fallout? What policy interventions should governments prioritize to support informal workers and self-employed women?





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**Ms. Stefania Fabricio** (Deputy Unit Chief, Strategy, Policy and Review Department, IMF) said that before the crisis, IMF studies had showed that raising women's labour force participation rates to that of men could boost worldwide GDP. Increases were estimated at about 5 per cent in the United States, 9 per cent in Japan and 27 per cent in India. Narrower gender gaps in labour markets resulted in higher outputs and export diversification, particularly in developing countries.

The pandemic had affected women more than men because:

- Women worked mostly in service sectors that required face-to-face interaction, such as catering, care or beauty. Those sectors had been hugely affected by lockdown measures. In the **United States**, a recent IMF study had found that women had lost the most jobs during the first nine months of the crisis.
- Women were likely to be employed in the informal sector. They had low wages, were not protected by labour laws, and had no access to pensions or health insurance.
- Women did more unpaid housework than men. That additional burden currently accounted for 45 per cent of the increase in the total gender pay gap in the **United States**. Between April and November 2020, the burden had also caused an estimated economic loss of about 0.4 per cent of US output.

"There are major economic gains in reducing gender gaps.

What is good for women is ultimately good for addressing economic growth and resilience.

There are key opportunities, and COVID-19 should be an opportunity to create a transformative gender equality agenda."

**Ms. Stefania Fabricio**, Deputy Unit Chief, Strategy, Policy and Review Department, IMF

The economy could not recover unless women could return to the labour force. To achieve this:

- Well-designed policies must be developed to mitigate and prevent further setbacks.
- Measures must be developed to ease women's return to work, such as making childcare available.
- Governments must support women financially, especially women who had lost their jobs. Support could be given through social benefits, tax credits for households with children, extending employment benefits, and childcare assistance.
- Governments should support women workers to find jobs in sectors other than those they had left, which could minimize the loss of human capital.
- Governments should design conditioning incentives for women to return to work. That could include investing in health care, education and relevant infrastructure.

**Ms. Emanuela Pozzan** (Senior Gender Equality and Non-discrimination specialist, ILO) confirmed that gender-responsive approaches during COVID-19 had been limited to short-term policies. They had proved to be inadequate or insufficient to reverse gender gaps in employment.

To close such gaps, governments must:

- Include domestic workers in their social security schemes.
- Lower registration fees for domestic workers so they could acquire an official status.
- Extend maternity and paternity leave.
- Provide cash subsidies to companies so they could retain working mothers.

However, for these policies to become long-term:

- Women needed universal access to comprehensive and adequate social protection. Currently, 60 per cent of women were not covered by any type of social protection.
- Governments needed to invest in the care economy, and the education, health, and social sectors, as they all generated a lot of jobs.
- Governments needed to develop well-designed leave policies for caregivers. Currently, very few countries were investing in early childhood care of 0–2 years old.



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and the Empowerment of Women

- Governments should ratify the [Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention](#) (ILO, No. 156, 1981). Unfortunately, it had not been widely ratified.
- Governments should develop wage transparency policies, as in Ireland.
- Minimum wages should be increased.
- Violence and harassment in the world of work, which currently included the home, should be eliminated.
- The [Violence and Harassment Convention](#) (ILO, No. 190, 2019) should be ratified and its provisions implemented. It was an excellent tool to ensure that women and men were protected from violence in the world of work.

## Discussion

### Overview

After the second session, the moderator asked all panellists to: give further examples of gender-responsive policies in response to COVID-19; share insights on the changes that create faster and more transformative progress; and give recommendations to MPs on how to harness their legislative, oversight and budget-allocation powers to address the current topic.

After having underlined that COVID-19 had exposed the fragility of the social safety net for childcare, and had also pushed girls to drop out of school in large numbers, the panellists gave national examples of measures to mitigate the economic inequalities experienced by women during COVID-19:

- In **Brazil**, the lower house of Congress had approved a Bill in March 2021 for a federal cash transfer programme. It would assist millions of poor families that had been hit hard by the pandemic. It would also provide monthly benefits to about 66 million informal workers and mothers at home.
- The Governments of the **Republic of Korea, Uzbekistan, and Trinidad and Tobago** had extended paid parental leave schemes.
- In **Costa Rica, Estonia and New Zealand**, additional measures were being created to provide emergency childcare for essential workers during lockdown.
- In **Canada**, work was under way to provide affordable and good-quality childcare services, and improve access for indigenous communities.
- In **Georgia**, the focus was on older women who had worked for many years in the informal sector, but who had no access to pension plans. Gender and social protection programmes had been created to cater for them. Sixty-five per cent of the beneficiaries of the programmes were younger women.
- In **Austria, Bulgaria, Peru and Cabo Verde**, home visits, and food and medicine deliveries had been scaled up for older people and people with disabilities.
- In **Hawaii**, there was the COVID-19 feminist economic recovery plan. It explicitly aimed to support women's economic independence, recognize and develop provisions on childcare, and put in place proposals to support indigenous and LGBTIQ+ women.
- In **Cuba, Germany and Latvia**, wage subsidies had been set up for carers.
- In **Argentina**, the super-rich had been taxed to help pay for medical supplies, aid and relief measures.
- In **Italy, Portugal and Slovenia**, when schools were closed, parents could take additional leave with reduced salary payments.
- In **Togo**, a digital cash transfer to informal workers affected by the pandemic had been launched. In all, 560,000 people had been reached, 65 per cent of whom were women.
- In **Canada**, gender budgeting had been federally mainstreamed. Benefits had also been set aside specifically for women-led enterprises.

To further mitigate the economic inequalities experienced by women during COVID-19, the panellists also gave the following advice.



### **Legislate for legal and constitutional reform:**

- Governments must fully support women's active participation in leadership and decision-making.
- Labour laws should be strengthened for women, and should also provide for health and pension benefits.
- Policies around teleworking should be further analysed. They needed to be regulated to ensure that teleworking was not used to keep women at home.
- Unpaid care work should be included in budgeting processes.

### **Build alliances with key stakeholders:**

- Economic policies should be scrutinized by civil society organizations, and women should be included in the design, implementation and monitoring of those policies.
- Parliamentary hearings must involve civil society organizations and open calls for evidence.

### **Invest in social infrastructure:**

- Investments should be made in the provision of electricity and water, alongside education, health and social care, especially in developing countries.
- Investments should be made in education. However, this should not focus only on girls, but also on human capital and the productivity of the whole of society.
- Investments should be made in public services and care-supporting infrastructure.
- Indicators should be set using well-being, social and environmental values rather than growth.

### **Using technological incentives:**

- Investments should be made in data collection and appropriate data disaggregation.

## **Moderated discussion**

### **Overview**

After the session, the floor was opened for interventions from participants. MPs from around the world commented on the topic, as well as on identifying national and global priorities and strategies for parliamentary action. They also answered the questions: What are the three priority actions that can contribute to or improve economic recovery for women? What are the key levers of success in adopting gender-responsive economic policies and legislation, and ensuring effective enforcement mechanisms? Who are the key stakeholders? Which alliance-building strategies could achieve a gender-responsive economy?

In **Seychelles**, COVID-19 had greatly affected women, especially single parents and mothers. The cost of living had risen, and business was proving very difficult for women. Parliament was therefore reviewing and reforming government policies, especially budgetary ones.

In **Montenegro**, people were asking how to improve legislation after the pandemic. Work was also under way to improve gender budgeting and services that help women enter the labour market.

In **Fiji**, work would address the intersections between women's economic empowerment and issues such as safety, unpaid care, leadership and participation, disaster preparedness, livelihoods, and gender-based violence. In 2021, a social protection policy had been adopted. It affirmed the Government's strong commitment to running gender-responsive programmes for women working in the informal sector. Other measures proposed to ensure further economic protection for women during and after COVID-19 included:

- Implementing gender-responsive budgeting across government.
- Gendered statistics and country assessments to identify gaps and opportunities and to ensure recovery plans covered those areas.
- Including women in the implementation stages of national recovery plans.

In **Canada**, there was Gender-based Analysis Plus. It was an analytical process used in parliament and ministries to assess how women, men and gender-diverse people benefited from policies, programmes, and initiatives. Creating alliances with men was important for such policies to work.

In **Madagascar**, although the legal age for marriage was 18 for both genders, levels of child marriage and underage pregnancies remained very high.

To conclude, **the Chair** pointed out that the pandemic had exacerbated existing inequalities. It was threatening to reverse the progress made, and could push 47 million more women and girls below the poverty line worldwide.

However, the pandemic had brought truth to the surface and had pushed people to ask important questions. She advised participants to:

- Work together and learn from each other.
- Apply best practices as much as possible.
- Set up targets, action plans and timelines to achieve more balanced representation. That could help socially and economically, and assist in closing the gender gap.

"Gender equality leads to better economies, societies and futures for forthcoming generations."

**Ms. Hoda Al-Helaissi** (Saudi Arabia),  
Member of the IPU Bureau of Women  
Parliamentarians

## Main findings and recommendations as presented to the IPU Forum of Women Parliamentarians<sup>9</sup>

Women had been hit harder than men by the COVID-19 impact on the world economy. In 2020, employment losses for women had stood at 5 per cent compared to 3.9 per cent for men. That was because more women (44%) than men (36%) worked in sectors such as accommodation, food services, wholesale and retail, which had all been hugely affected by lockdown measures. Although many women had lost their jobs, they had also faced an increase in unpaid household and care responsibilities.

In particular, low-paid women had borne the brunt of the economic collapse. Low-paid women encompassed informal women workers, domestic workers, migrant workers, women without internet access or literacy skills, and poor and marginalized women. They had not been protected by labour laws, had been excluded from social protection schemes, had not had access to loans, and had also been overlooked by pandemic relief and recovery packages. As a result, by 2021, around 435 million women and girls had been living on less than US\$ 1.90 a day, and 47 million had been pushed into poverty. Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic had resulted in a wider gender wage gap.

<sup>9</sup> See IPU Forum of Women Parliamentarians, 31st session (virtual), May 2021: [www.ipu.org/event/142nd-ipu-assembly#event-sub-page-documents/](http://www.ipu.org/event/142nd-ipu-assembly#event-sub-page-documents/).

However, the economy could not recover without the reintegration of women into the labour force and the elimination of the gender gap in employment. Measures must therefore be taken to support women who had been most affected by COVID-19 restrictions so as to prevent further setbacks and ease women's return to work.

Such measures must include providing:

- Financial support to women who had lost their source of income.
- Support to families and women in unpaid work.
- Assistance to women in finding jobs outside hard-hit sectors.
- Access to affordable and good-quality childcare services.

Those measures were essential in the short term, but long-term measures were needed the most to eliminate the gender gap. Consequently, long-term investments should be urgently made in universal and gender-responsive social protection systems for women, as 60 per cent of women were not covered by any type of social protection.

After COVID-19, recovery plans also needed to address long-standing inequalities, including the unequal division of work at home, the pervasive undervaluation of unpaid care work done mostly by women, and the gender pay gap. In some countries, transparent wage policies and well-designed care leave policies had already been developed. Other countries had chosen to invest in the care economy, and the education, health and social sectors. Care workers had been prioritized by compensating them justly, and by providing adequate safety nets and employment benefits.