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Parliamentary experiences in promoting women's, children's and adolescents' health in the time of COVID-19 and in recovering from the pandemic

33rd session of the Forum of Women Parliamentarians

Sunday, 20 March 2022
14:30 to 16:30, room Nusantara 2 & 3, 1st floor

Background

Significant progress has been achieved in women's, children's and adolescents' health (WCAH) in recent decades. However, inequalities remain, with 94 per cent of maternal deaths occurring in low- and lower-middle-income countries¹, and only half of small and sick newborns having access to high-quality care.

Most maternal, newborn and child deaths are preventable. Prevention does not only require investment and supportive legislation, but also for structural causes and barriers to be addressed. Many women, children and adolescents are prevented from benefitting from the health care they need because of inability to pay, lack of information, or the unavailability of quality services and trained personnel, as well as unsupportive cultural and gender norms, in particular in relation to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated inequalities and had a wide range of impacts on women, children and adolescents. Attention and resources were diverted from sexual and reproductive health services which, coupled with disruptions to the provision of family planning products, left an estimated 12 million women unable to access family planning services². Children and adolescents were further impacted by school closures and lockdowns, affecting their educational opportunities and exposing them to an increased risk of violence and harmful practices, including child marriage and unintended teenage pregnancies.

At the same time, innovative approaches, such as the use of telemedicine and new ways of disseminating information, have emerged. The pandemic has also been a unique opportunity to invest in access to health care, through addressing persisting gender inequalities, and further promoting women's and young peoples' empowerment.

¹ WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and the United Nations Population Division. Maternal mortality: Levels and trends 2000 to 2017. 2019. Available at:

<https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/maternal-mortality-2000-2017/en/>

² UNFPA. Impact of COVID-19 on Family Planning: What we know one year into the pandemic.

Technical note. March 2021. Available at: <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/impact-covid-19-family-planning-what-we-know-one-year-pandemic>

Objectives

The panel will discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on WCAH, with a particular focus on inequitable access to health services, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and child and adolescent well-being. The aim is to provide a platform to identify legislative and policy changes required to promote WCAH in COVID-19 response and recovery, and to strengthen the role of parliamentarians in championing sexual and reproductive health and rights, and improving access to health services for all. Parliamentarians will be encouraged to share their countries' practices, initiatives and the challenges they face on the topics under discussion, and propose concrete strategies for follow up at the national and global levels.

Format

This is a two-hour long panel discussion which will be divided into two main segments:

Segment 1 – COVID-19: Impact on women, children and adolescents

5 minutes

Introductory remarks

10 minutes

A reality check

Testimonials on the realities of women, children and adolescents and their access to health care services in the context of the pandemic

20 minutes

Inequalities and disruptions in access to health care services

Introductory presentations on the following issues:

- **Raising inequalities:** how COVID-19 is creating new vulnerabilities in access to health care for women, children and adolescents
- **Sexual and reproductive health and rights:** the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to sexual and reproductive health and rights and how they are affecting the lives and chances to survive and thrive of women and adolescents worldwide
- **COVID-19 disruptions in education, including sexuality education, and increased exposure to risks of violence and harmful practices:** interlinked, negative consequences for children's and adolescents' health and rights, with a focus on teenage pregnancies and child marriage

30 minutes

Interactive discussion

Guiding questions:

- How is your parliament investigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on access to health services for women, children and adolescents?
- What is the emerging evidence in your country on unintended pregnancies and harmful practices resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What effective redressive strategies exist and what partnerships can be built to implement them?

Segment 2 – Sharing of good practices

15 minutes

Paths for redressive action and ensuring a comprehensive approach to WCAH in COVID-19 response and recovery

Introductory presentations on parliamentary good practices

35 minutes

Interactive discussion

Guiding questions:

- What legislative or other initiatives is your country promoting to improve access to sexual and reproductive health information and services?
- How can COVID-19 recovery plans help address poverty and inequalities and benefit WCAH?

5 minutes

Wrap up and conclusion