



COVID-19 sparks urgency around justice for women, new report calls for action

A new report documents major challenges to women's access to justice in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and puts forth recommendations to accelerate action and push back against threats to progress.

May 21, 2020 – The COVID-19 pandemic escalates threats to women's access to justice according to a new joint report, *Justice for Women Amidst COVID-19*, released today by UN Women, IDLO, UNDP, UNODC, World Bank and The Pathfinders for Justice and supported by the Elders.

Curtailed access to justice institutions, rising intimate partner violence, growing injustice for women workers – including those on the frontlines of the crisis – and discriminatory laws are some of the major risks to women's lives and livelihoods associated with COVID-19.

The report documents emerging challenges and pre-existing gender justice gaps that have been exacerbated by the pandemic – not least an alarming upsurge in domestic violence after lockdowns were announced. Estimates suggest that roughly 2.73 billion women around the world live in countries where stay-at-home orders are in place, which sharply heightens the risk of intimate partner violence.

“Formal and informal spaces which afforded women appropriate safeguards are quickly shrinking”, says Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka. “Thankfully, both state and non-state actors have galvanized into action as seen in the smart and accessible interventions emerging in several countries. Some women however remain unsafe and invisible due to the digital divide. Forging private and public sector partnerships during the pandemic can ensure that all women have access to mobile phones. Justice systems can no longer be static: we need to begin to explore more sustainable ways of justice delivery, such as for example, optimizing interim orders to prevent rights violations. Furthermore, innovative parliamentary business must be pursued to ensure that the estimated 2.5 million women and girls affected by discriminatory laws are fully protected.”

“We cannot let gender equality and women's rights be among the casualties of COVID-19”, stated Jan Beagle, Director-General of IDLO. “Now more than ever, it is imperative for justice institutions to address the needs of women and girls and deliver people-centered justice. The current pandemic has brought to the forefront the staggeringly wide gap of injustice and inequality. It is more than just a public health and economic emergency, it is also a moral crisis – where those who are already excluded are further marginalized and exposed to heightened dangers. As the risk of gender-based violence continues to grow during the pandemic, and the ability of justice institutions to effectively deliver services is diminished, it is of utmost priority to forge innovative ways to support women's access to justice and empower them to realize their rights.”

While the health sector is at the epicenter of the pandemic, the resilience of the justice sector and its ability to deliver justice for women has been brought into sharp focus as the reality of the global crisis sets in.



There is serious concern that gains made on gender equality will be rolled back, including through delays in reversing discriminatory laws, the enactment of new laws and the implementation of existing legislation.

The crisis particularly affects vulnerable groups of women, including those who are forcibly displaced, deprived of liberty or lack a legal identity, and the impact is compounded by the digital divide according to the report.

At a time when digital connectivity is more important than ever to access life-saving information and justice services, women are 20 per cent less likely to own a smartphone and 20 per cent less likely to access the internet from mobile phones than men, bringing into question the extent to which violations of women's rights can be addressed during the pandemic.

The report cautions that if urgent action is not undertaken, the effects of COVID - 19 are likely to derail the fragile progress made towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including SDGs 5 on gender equality and 16 on peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

As the international community races to respond to the risks of a slowdown in the wake of the pandemic, the report presents a global synthesis of the state of justice systems in connection with women's justice needs and highlights innovative interventions underway in many parts of the world.

Calling for a fresh wave of momentum, *Justice for Women Amidst COVID-19* urges justice leaders and all stakeholders to take action to increase justice for women and girls during the global health emergency.

"Countries have saved lives by shutting down economies to prevent the spread of COVID-19 but we now need concerted action to ensure that they do not lose hard-won development gains," said UNDP Administrator, Achim Steiner. "As the United Nations moves quickly to support the socio-economic recovery of countries around the world, it is crucial that we have a better understanding of where support is needed most – particularly when it comes to access to justice for women."

Liv Tørres, Director, Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies states: "Without decisive action, the meagre progress we have made on women's rights and gender equality over the past decades will be undermined. The justice gap for women is growing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We see an increase in the number of justice problems that women face, due to lockdowns and economic hardship. Simultaneously, the capacity to resolve these justice problems is decreasing. The pandemic is making our gender disparities abundantly clear, reinforces them but also shows us how they can be rectified by policy action. This report is a call for action."

"COVID-19 is public health crisis as well as a socio-economic catastrophe," says Graça Machel, Deputy-Chair of The Elders and Founder of The Graça Machel Trust. "It exacerbates existing gender inequalities and undermines women's rights and liberties. Women's voices and leadership must be at the core of the response to the pandemic and beyond. This new report sets out important findings and recommendations which I urge the highest levels of political power to take seriously."



Justice for Women Amidst COVID-19 was developed by a cohort of international organizations, led by UN Women, the International Development Law Organization (IDLO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), World Bank, Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, and supported by The Elders.

It builds on the 2019 [*Justice for Women*](#) report, jointly produced by the High-level Group on Justice for Women, which was co-convened by UN Women, IDLO, the World Bank, and Pathfinders. The report identifies the common justice problems women face, makes the case for investment and recommends strategies to accelerate action around justice for women.