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RECOMMENDATIONS

FROM

POLICY DIALOGUE

COMBATING VIOLENCE
AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS
AND STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S RIGHTS
IN THE CONTEXT OF
COVID 19 PANDEMIC

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Implementing the Fourth Union for the
Mediterranean Ministerial Declaration on Strengthening
the Role of Women in Society

To ensure a gender perspective when making decisions
about the Covid-19 pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 crisis has put a spotlight on existing structural inequalities and the different realities that women and men are facing because of the pandemic.

Women are at the forefront of dealing with the consequences of the pandemic. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), about 70% of workers exposed to the virus in health and social care, trade professions, cleaning services and personal care provision are women. Loss of income, deteriorating working conditions, closure of schools, changes in daily life and the home quarantine put an added burden on women, who traditionally take on more responsibilities at home and in the family and struggle to find jobs in the formal labour market. The Covid-19 crisis has severely impacted low - and middle-income countries, due to poor public health systems, education, social protection, and infrastructure. These countries need international support to face the pandemic.

Moreover, violation of international laws and United Nations (UN) resolutions and conventions including violence against women and girls (VAWG) – especially domestic violence – has been on the rise because of the lockdown measures. Globally, there is increasing disregard for international laws. The closure of appeal and rescue services creates additional difficulties. It becomes harder to manage and deal with cases of violence and protect victims whose safety and lives are in danger.

The 4th Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) Ministerial Declaration on Strengthening the Role of Women in Society (2017, Cairo) is an important tool to advance women's rights and therefore a reference to address the impact of the pandemic on women and girls.

Having analysed the effect on women and girls, EuroMed Feminist Initiative (EFI) in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Development of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan organised on September 21, 2020 a regional policy dialogue “Combating VAWG and Strengthening Women's Rights in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic”. The dialogue took place on-line, bringing together decision-makers and ministerial representatives, legal and gender experts, researchers, and women's rights organisations from seven countries in the Euro-Med region (Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia), the European Union (EU) and the UfM.

These recommendations stem from the policy dialogue to support the implementation of the 4th UfM Ministerial Declaration during the Covid-19 crisis and beyond. They are based on the ministers affirmed international obligations and commitments stated in the 4th UfM Ministerial Declaration on Strengthening the Role of Women in Society and are structured under the key priority areas identified by member States in the 4th UfM Ministerial Declaration:

- I. Raising women's participation in public life and decision-making
- II. Raising women's economic participation
- III. Combating all forms of violence against women and girls
- IV. Challenging cultural and social norms and eliminate gender stereotypes, particularly in and through education and media
- V. Fostering implementation and strengthening operational cooperation

The recommendations will inform the next UfM High-Level Conference “Accelerating Gender Equality in the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic” on 16-20 November 2020.

I. Raising women's participation in public life and decision-making during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond

1.1. Strengthening women's access to and participation in the Covid-19 health response

While more men globally have died from the pandemic, unemployment, social distancing, and isolation have affected the physical and mental health of women to a greater extent. Women make up the majority of those working on the frontline in the healthcare sector to combat the pandemic. However, the under-representation of women in health governance and decision-making means that the impact of the pandemic on them is ignored.

Women provide most of the care for their children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and other family members and relatives. At a time when all medical and human resources are focused on the outbreak, many other health concerns are not considered a priority. Many health services are being neglected or threatened, notably women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Design policies and interventions which address the impact of Covid-19 on women and girls and develop specific indicators.
- Recognise the different extent to which disease outbreaks affect women and girls, especially those from at-risk and marginalised groups. Gender-sensitive data and analysis are essential to understand the impacts of a health emergency and global crisis like Covid-19 on women and girls.
- Incorporate gender analysis into the institutional preparedness and response to the crisis and post crisis to ensure women have access to health care and prevention.
- Provide protective instruments and tools to health workers.
- Implement affirmative measures to increase the representation of women in national structures dealing with Covid-19, health governance, decision-making and executive positions, to make sure there is a gender perspective in healthcare decisions.
- Lift financial and other barriers to Covid-19 testing and treatment services to ensure equitable access for all, including women and groups who tend to be excluded from national healthcare systems.
- Integrate mental and psychological support into the health sector for women and girls who are suspected to have contracted or have contracted Covid-19.
- Provide human and material resources to health service providers and caretakers to increase the availability of and access to psychosocial and mental health support.
- Maintain the continuity of and equitable access to essential sexual and reproductive healthcare services during Covid-19, making sure information is available and spread adequately. Ensuring equitable access for all, means lifting obstacles, including the lack of availability and accessibility of services in healthcare centres in villages and remote areas for excluded women such as refugees. Moreover, it requires addressing barriers such as Israeli check points in the West Bank and the siege of Gaza.
- Enact social protection laws that provide health insurance for citizens, including women working in the informal sector and carrying out household duties.

1.2. Towards a gendered approach to decision-making on policies and measures addressing Covid-19

The pandemic has demanded political decision-makers, in both the public and private sectors, to make urgent decisions and develop extraordinary measures. However, the decisions made today continue to be shaped predominantly by men. According to the UN, only around 25% of the world's members of parliament are women. And less than 10% of the world's heads of State and government are women. As acknowledged in the *2017 EU Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU's External Action*, women and girls should not only be viewed as a vulnerable group but as powerful agents for change.

Women play an indispensable and essential role in crisis management and reducing vulnerabilities at multiple levels (State, society, and community). In the context of Covid-19 pandemic, the absence of women in decision-making means the analyses on the impact of Covid-19 are gender blinded. When women do not participate in decision making, their needs are not analysed and met accordingly. It is no longer acceptable to take decisions on behalf of women in their absence, and without including their opinions and perspective.

With the Covid-19 outbreak, women's rights organisations and civil society have urgently stepped in, not only to provide services and consultations to victims of domestic violence, disseminating information about existing services and reporting on the increased rate of violence, but they have also provided recommendations to policymakers, highlighting the situation on the ground. Women's rights organisations provide an invaluable source of data that can inform policy and decision making in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Apply quotas and increase women's participation in decision-making and at negotiating tables about the Covid-19 crisis in all fields (health, education, politics, economics, and governance).
- Ensure women are part of crisis management committees to avoid the shortcomings of gender-blind policies and systems and develop policies that address gendered needs.
- Consult women's rights organisations and consider their analyses and recommendations when making decisions on how best to respond to the pandemic.
- Improve women's access to resources, including affirmative actions, capacity building and financial support, so they can take part in decision making about issues relating to the household, society and politics, as drivers of social, environmental and economic development.
- Inspire future policies by highlighting examples of women leaders who have introduced successful measures and policies during Covid-19 and promoting women's experience in decision-making.
- Ensure women are part of crisis management committees to develop policies that address gender needs.

1.3. Promoting the Women, Peace and Security Agenda during Covid-19

The Women Peace and Security Agenda (WPSA) defines how security and peace should be sustained and conflicts resolved, by applying a gender equality perspective. It stresses that gender equality is central to peace and security of the whole society, and states that addressing the root causes of VAWG is critical to preventing conflicts. It focuses not only on protecting women and girls from violence but on women's right to participate in decision-making processes. In summary, the WPSA applies gender perspective and analyses in all areas of participation, prevention, protection, legislation, VAWG, equal access to power and resources. It also applies gender perspective to the labour market, recovery and transitional justice after military conflict, ending of occupation and militarisation. Resources should also be allocated to integrating a gender perspective into all policies, not just those related to women.

The consequences of the Covid-19 outbreak severely affect women living under occupation of Palestine, and women who are displaced by the protracted military conflicts in Libya, Syria and Yemen. This is especially crucial in the occupied Palestine, where women and girls live in an environment of multiple forms of violence under the Israeli ongoing colonies and military settlement policies. Israeli occupation weakens the ability of the Palestinian authorities, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and women's rights organisations to respond effectively to the pandemic and its impact on women and girls. It also threatens women's and girls' lives by prohibiting their access to health care centres.

Women and men living in refugee camps are especially vulnerable due to overcrowded conditions where distancing is impossible. They do not have access to healthcare, education, and proper sanitation. Refugees and migrant women living outside camps in gatherings are also vulnerable, as they are not properly informed of services, are not aware of their rights, and face barriers to accessing healthcare, education, justice, and other services.

It is important to emphasise that democracy, peace, and social justice in the region are prerequisites for achieving gender equality in the Covid-19 response and recovery measures, and to recognise that war and occupation have exacerbated the impact of Covid-19 on women's conditions and weakened national programming and services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Raise awareness about the increased vulnerability of women living under occupation during the pandemic. Hold Israel accountable for the suffering of Palestinian women in accordance with international humanitarian law and international human rights law.
- Demand the lifting of the blockade on Gaza and the end of the occupation of the West Bank, including Jerusalem, to allow relevant actors, including women's rights organisations, to provide effective and gender-inclusive responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. This will help to support the continuity of sexual and reproductive healthcare, prevention of and protection from VAWG.
- Ensure international actors support vital humanitarian efforts in Palestine to deliver immediate medical relief to women and girls, with the support of women's rights organisations.
- Enforce the implementation of international human rights instruments, international agreements, UN resolutions and treaties providing international protection for women, such as UNSCR 1325, CEDAW and SDGs 5 and 17. These are the basis for achieving women's freedom and rights and improving women's lives during the Covid-19 crisis.
- Reinforce the responsibility of governments to protect Palestinian women and uphold the rights and freedom of the Palestinian people.
- Support civil society, in particular women's rights organisations in their work for political solution to the armed conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Libya, and for ending occupation of Palestine through political measures based on justice, and involving women's rights defenders in all peace and political negotiations.
- Demand gender sensitivity in international aid, to be able to address the needs and rights of women. Politicizing of international humanitarian aid and funding which is used as a pressure card against Palestinian institutions and the rights of the Palestinian people should be uncovered and addressed.
- Develop national action plans for UNSCR 1325 with sufficient budgets and ensure they are incorporated and mainstreamed into national executive plans and strategies, and throughout all government sectors.
- Make sure refugee, migrant and displaced women are included in the national response plans to Covid-19 to ensure that their needs are addressed and that they have access to health, protection, and other services.
- Increase provision of psychosocial, legal, sexual, and reproductive health services for displaced women and women refugees in camps and refugee gatherings.
- Adopt measures to mitigate the structural inequalities faced by migrant women and women refugees residing outside camps to improve their access to sexual and reproductive health services during the Covid-19 crisis.

II. Raising women's economic participation during the Covid-19 pandemic

The economic shutdown to stop the spread of the Covid-19 has devastating consequences for women. Structural barriers to equal economic opportunities, social norms and gender stereotypes prevent women from finding work and accessing their labour rights. Women tend to occupy jobs that are precarious, temporary, part time and low paid, with weaker legal protection and lack of social and health protection. Unemployment is increasing because of Covid-19 and women in the informal sector and daily wage workers are particularly affected.

At the same time, public policies and programs do not consider equal sharing of care work between men and women. Women are burdened disproportionately by unpaid care and housework. Statistics from the EU show that, in the member States, women were spending 13 hours a week more than men on home care and housework before the outbreak. When schools close during lockdowns, women often stop work to look after the children. They are also more likely to take care of older relatives and relatives with disabilities or chronic diseases who could get sick, which affects their income and increases their unpaid work. Covid-19 is increasing the risk of poverty and social exclusion especially for women headed households and single mothers, as they need to combine working from home and caring for children.

The most vulnerable groups, such as young and older women, single mothers, women with low qualifications, migrant and refugee women and women with disabilities, are in the most precarious situation. They tend to work in low paid informal work or forced labour. Domestic workers are usually employed in the informal economy, without knowledge of, or access to their rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Apply gender analyses to Covid-19 recovery measures, learning from the negative effects of previous financial and economic crises on women, to avoid disproportioned impact.
- Prioritise the provision of direct financial support and cash assistance to vulnerable women during the pandemic. This includes nurses, caregivers in childhood centres, female-headed households, women with disabilities or those with family members with disabilities, victims of violence and women living in shelters.
- Give financial support to and expand safety nets for vulnerable women to ease economic hardship.
- Provide compensation to women who have lost their jobs in the informal sector and make sure they have access to unemployment schemes. Part-time, flexible, and other forms of non-standard employment should have an adequate steady income and be eligible for social security.
- Expand the social protection system and ensure there is funding to create and enhance various programs for different vulnerable groups. Ensure women have access to digital platforms to access social security programming and assistance.
- Mitigate the economic impact of Covid-19 on women by giving them access to technology and online platforms. Increase access to in-kind, financial aid, public services, and online services and provisions.
- Improve the provision of affordable and accessible childcare support services.
- Base all economic recovery measures and subsidies, including postponing the payments of small microloans and supporting small business owners with low interest rate loans, on a gender assessment of the impact of the pandemic on women and men. This must include an assessment of barriers for women posed by social norms and gender stereotypes.
- Develop recovery plans that promote the importance of women's work and women's economic participation as key for equality and sustainable development. This entails: 1. Ensuring equal access to jobs and pay, 2. Social and health protection of refugee and displaced women, 3. Raising awareness to change people's attitude towards unpaid care work and integrating a gender perspective into textbooks of equal reproductive roles and portrayal of men undertaking care work and household responsibilities and 4. Private and public institutions taking measures to lessen the domestic and care burden on women.

III. Combating all forms of violence against women and girls during the Covid-19 pandemic

In times of crisis, domestic abuse and VAWG increase. During the Covid-19 lockdown, the rates and severity of VAWG, including sexual violence, raised drastically. Stress, unemployment, and financial instability are additional triggers for domestic violence. Social distancing and isolation are amplifying the issue. In Lebanon, registered cases of violence have increased by 180% since the start of lockdown. In Morocco it has increased by 36% and 33% in Jordan. A 32% increase in domestic violence was registered in France in just over the space of one week after the country went into lockdown on March 17, 2020. Spain has seen an increase in VAWG by 60% since the beginning of home confinement, and Italy a 70% increase. In Tunisia, VAWG has increased five-fold. In addition to the increased violence and aggression by the occupied forces, VAWG cases increased by 21% in Palestine over one month from mid-March to mid-April 2020, with 21% of victims of violence attempting suicide.

Women and girls victims of violence and persecution are not able to leave for asylum countries due to the closure of borders, and travel restrictions, multiplication of military check points in Palestine and situations of siege like in Gaza. Many trials of perpetrators of violence have been delayed, while some perpetrators have been released before going to trial, putting their victims under renewed threat. Because of the quarantine, the postponing of issuing of alimony or divorce complaints increased women's vulnerability to violence. The electronic method for filling out a request for economic support and submitting a complaint posed great difficulty for poor and illiterate women.

Women's rights organisations play a major role in providing support to victims of violence, delivering data reports on the level of violence, and providing recommendations to cover the gaps in the response.

3.1. Legal protection of women and girls against violence

The Covid-19 crisis has brought to light the need to reaffirm and enshrine equal rights for women and girls within constitutions and laws, and on the accountability of all States to the international human rights law and international humanitarian law, and the principles of equality and non-discrimination. Urgent measures are needed as well as resources for their implementation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Conduct a comprehensive review of efforts including referral systems, protection systems and services, national laws, awareness raising programs and the harmonisation of national legislation with CEDAW.
- Develop comprehensive laws that criminalise all forms of VAWG specifically domestic violence and harassment, following the examples of Morocco and Tunisia.
- Put prevention and protection measures in place and allocate resources for their implementation. Meanwhile, enforce existing laws that protect women and girls and introduce immediate protective measures during times of crises and effective protection bodies, including legal and judicial bodies, for abused women and children.

3.2. Promoting a holistic approach that includes Prevention, Protection, Prohibition, Response and Public Awareness

Many women have been trapped at home with abusers during the lockdowns. The latter cut routes to safety and support and made it difficult to escape an abusive family member. Moreover, access to protection services delivered by the State and CSOs is declining because of the lack of public policies, infrastructure, financial and human resources. Alternative centres were set up for victims of violence to access support. But they do not always have sufficient protection equipment, including medical gloves, face masks and detergent for cleaning, to shield people from the virus.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure VAWG is a priority for governmental policies and measures to address the impact of Covid-19 and incorporate a gender responsive approach into Covid-19 crisis management to ensure women's human rights are protected and that women's lives are free from violence.
- Develop a national or country specific protocols and referral systems to address VAWG and protect victims specifically during pandemics.
- Develop a regional protocol to address VAWG and protect victims during pandemics.
- Develop special measures to support the most vulnerable women should be implemented.
- Ensure effective coordination between stakeholders to address VAWG during the Covid-19 pandemic and other similar crises.
- Enhance coordination between first line responders to ensure a timely response to the increased risks of VAWG.
- Dedicate financial support for helpline services and free legal aid.
- Improve the knowledge, attitudes, and practices on gender-sensitive and victim-centred approaches and methods of police, and people working in the justice and health sectors.
- Provide protective measures and resources (including equipment) for service providers, including CSOs, to keep shelters and services open for victims of violence during the pandemic.
- Provide full health coverage and safe access to sexual and reproductive health services in the response plans, especially for victims of violence, during periods of crisis. Expand and develop the social protection system to include victims of violence.
- Provide legal assistance for and support to women who are already imprisoned or detained to protect them against violence from male members of their families.
- Ensure imprisoned women have access to legal services and reproductive health services, and health protective measures during the pandemic.
- Spread credible and adequate information on the availability and continuity of helplines and services for victims of violence, both nationally and locally, during lockdown and beyond.
- Support the ongoing regional campaign "Zero Tolerance for VAWG", which involves communities, including men, working to combat VAWG.
- Strengthen national data collection on VAWG and establish a comprehensive and unified national database providing sex disaggregated data.
- Establish a regional platform to compile information, analysis and best practices for preventive and protective measures.

IV. Challenging cultural and social norms and eliminate gender stereotypes during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in and through education and media

4.1. Advancing gender equality in education and learning during Covid-19

The partial and total closure of schools puts an additional and disproportionate burden on women, who traditionally suffer from unequal family and domestic responsibilities. Home schooling and distance learning has increased women's unpaid work, including teachers. This has impacted their mental health and wellbeing, and increased unemployment and domestic violence. Likewise, the closing of secondary schools and higher education institutions has affected girls and young women as they have had to complete domestic tasks and care work while studying. The risk of school drop-out as a result of Covid-19 and the subsequent socioeconomic crisis is likely to severely affect girls and young women. This will lead to inequalities in accessing the labour market, an increase in early child marriage, forced labour and exploitation.

There are significant gaps in availability of and accessing online learning tools for women and girls, especially in remote and rural areas and for vulnerable groups such as refugee and displaced women and girls. Girls and young women are facing disproportionate difficulties in accessing information and technology-based learning due to their overall lower levels of digital inclusion. Digital exclusion also widens the education gaps of certain social groups during the Covid-19 crisis, for example, migrants, refugees and minorities.

Similar to the health sector, the majority of those who work in formal and informal education are women. They have been striving to help their students by putting distance learning in place, often without sufficient guidance, training, support and resources. As schools reopen, they may put their own health at risk to make sure learning can continue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Conduct gender analyses of Covid-19 measures to avoid a negative impact on women, including teachers and girls.
- Ensure equal access to learning to meet the needs of all women and girls from different age and social groups.
- Integrate a gender perspective into the online education system to ensure quality learning and that both teachers and parents have the capacity to support children's education.
- Make targeted efforts to close the digital gap while ensuring that girls and young women, with little or no access to information and communication technologies, fully benefit from online learning tools and/or have access to alternative learning tools. For example, combining classroom teaching and remote learning.
- Ensure substantial budgets are in place for health, education, and infrastructure, for example public health facilities and schools, to address the needs of the most vulnerable women. As such, make sure families and vulnerable groups have equal access to online education through the provision of computers and online connectivity. The poor and people living in rural areas have been particularly affected because of the lack of internet, phones, and computers.
- Redistribute care work between men and women and between State and society/families to lessen the care burden on women, caregivers, and teachers. This will help to reduce the burden on mothers who have been supporting their children with distance education.
- Incorporate gender into the education curricula as part of the e-learning methodologies (learning approaches and strategies, course content and evaluation strategies).
- Integrate special educational tools to inform the future generation of the importance of combating VAWG as a major barrier to achieving gender equality.
- Train staff working in education about gender equality and integrate gender equality into e-learning materials and tools to ensure young people learn about the values of equality between women/girls and men/boys.
- Train parents and mothers on how to use online school platforms to make sure young people receive high quality learning and education.

- Provide an enabling work environment for and the necessary protection and support to people working in education. It is important to recognise their efforts to ensure the continuity of education during the Covid-19 crisis.
- Increase the representation of women in education governance, decision-making and executive positions to ensure there is a gender perspective in decisions made about education.

4.2. Fostering public awareness in challenging cultural norms and engaging with men

- The Covid-19 pandemic has put both societies and families into a strained situation. As children have to stay home, it is often the mothers who end up staying there with them, putting their careers on hold.
- Challenge cultural and social norms, and gender stereotypes during the pandemic, particularly be alert in education and the media.
- Make campaigns to raise awareness of parents of the importance of challenging gender stereotyping in home schooling and sharing of responsibilities at home.

Raise awareness on gender stereotypes school curriculum and work on eliminating it.

4.3. A gender-inclusive media during Covid-19

The media has covered a huge amount of information and messages about Covid-19 during the pandemic. People are relying on social media to find out information, but this is often inaccurate. Cases of harassment on social media are reported to have increased, affecting women and girls at all levels including in politics and schools. This reinforces stigma and stereotypes but also offers the opportunity to challenge traditional gender roles and representations.

Given the dramatic increase in VAWG during the Covid-19 crisis, the media must be proactive in raising awareness, providing essential information for victims of violence, and advocating for women's rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Identify and counter stigmatisation and discriminatory representation and practices in Covid-19 responses and messages.
- Run awareness-raising and information campaigns in the media to address gender stereotypes and encourage men to share work responsibilities during Covid-19 and beyond.
- Promote positive gender roles in the media to support the Covid-19 crisis response and recovery. These must avoid harmful stereotypes about women's and girls' roles in society, for example, challenging social norms and balancing the burden of care currently experienced in homes.
- Ensure the media plays a positive role in raising awareness against VAWG by spreading consistent and evidence-based information about VAWG (risks, prevention, and protection resources).
- Monitor the media uses credible and well-sourced information about VAWG and accurate information is posted on social media platforms to avoid spreading gender-based stereotypes, ideas, and stories. This is increasingly affecting women and social groups based on origin and status, for example refugees or migrants.
- Support CSOs and government agencies to set up or improve preventive and protective measures against VAWG, including harassment in politics and in schools. These should be promoted in the media and on social media.
- Use the media and social media platforms in a creative manner to target youth and men and change attitudes towards VAWG.
- Ensure victims of violence do not receive potential threats of additional violence as a result of being featured and/or appearing in the media. Make sure women victims of violence are well quoted in media reports and their opinion and perspective is well respected.
- Increase the representation of women in media governance, decision-making and executive positions, to ensure a gender perspective in the media.

V. Fostering implementation and strengthening operational cooperation

The 4th UfM Ministerial Declaration, the EU Gender Action Plan II, the EU Strategic Engagement on Women, Peace and Security, and the EU Strategy on Gender Equality 2020-2025 are all powerful tools to guide actions that support women and girls during the Covid-19 crisis.

With its multipronged approach and well-defined pillars, the 4th UfM Ministerial Declaration provides a strong base for devising mechanisms that foster operational cooperation and designing gender responsive strategies in times of crises. Likewise, the regional consultations and dialogues that stem from the 4th UfM Ministerial Declaration reinforce the commitment of multiple stakeholders to develop a joint and coordinated response that puts women and girls at the heart of ongoing Covid-19 plans.

Operational cooperation is vital to supporting the role of women as active participants and strong leaders in the recovery of communities and economies. Feminist and women's rights organisations play an essential part in fostering the fulfilment of women's rights and monitoring the challenges and progress made. At the core, the recommendations and partnerships provide the platform for mainstreaming a gender perspective in:

1. Government decisions about Covid-19.
2. The legal framework for health, education, technology and the media in times of crises and emergency to create effective, responsive, and equitable policies, preparedness plans and responses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Conduct broad, national, regional, and sectoral consultations to develop and follow up on implementation of gender-sensitive Covid-19 response and recovery plans. Experiences and lessons learnt from the Covid-19 crisis about gender equality should be used as a learning opportunity to reform policies based on social justice.
- Maximise and strategize regional cooperation on a medium and long-term basis to strengthen support for and protection of the most vulnerable women affected by Covid-19.
- Reinforce regional multi-stakeholder partnerships and commitment to develop a joint and coordinated response that puts women and girls at the heart of Covid-19 recovery plans and recognises them as participants and leaders in the recovery of communities and economies. To achieve this, the involvement and participation of women's rights organisations is essential. They also play a key role in monitoring the situation on the ground.
- Introduce a mechanism to respond to emergencies and crises as part of the monitoring progress set in the Cairo Ministerial Declaration.
- Devise national interventions that integrate the recommendations from the 4th UfM Ministerial Declaration to ensure gender responsive measures to the Covid-19 crisis. Link them to monitoring and evaluation plans to measure achievements and progress.
- Develop well-functioning plans that integrate a gender perspective to ensure the implementation of all previously outlined recommendations and address all gaps that have surfaced during the Covid-19 crisis.
- Enhance budget allocation for Covid-19 preparedness, response and recovery plans that incorporate gender and ensure gender responsive budgeting.
- Strengthen partnerships between institutional stakeholders and women's rights organisations to translate long-term commitments into action and safeguard women's rights.

- Ensure better coordination and cooperation between national, international and regional stakeholders working on the same issues and targeting the same beneficiaries to enhance services, activate laws and provide protection measures. Ensure continuous exchanges of experiences and lessons learned.
- Review the timeframe for implementing the 2030 SDGs, utilise the fifth goal to end VAWG, and review the Three Zero commitments of the ICPD (zero unmet need for contraception, zero preventable maternal deaths, and zero gender-based violence and harmful practice) in light of Covid-19. Enact special measures to support women and rebuild budgets based on new priorities, including health, education and infrastructure.
- Put the needs and rights of women at the core of international aid mechanisms to mitigate the impact of Covid-19. This includes standing united against the politicising of international humanitarian aid and donor funding, which is used as a pressure card against Palestinian CSOs and women rights organisations.

CONCLUSIONS

The current, unprecedented situation created by the Covid-19 pandemic can be used as an opportunity to bring structural changes to the social, political and economic spheres in Euro-Mediterranean countries.

It can also be used to enhance cooperation to advance gender equality in line with the 4th UfM Ministerial Declaration on women's rights. It calls for immediate, medium, and long-term actions while actively engaging CSOs.

The response of governments to Covid-19 should be in accordance with human rights standards and the principles of equality and non-discrimination of the most vulnerable groups. These include: women victims of violence, female-headed households, women working in the informal sector, elderly people, people with disabilities or health problems, people in rural areas, the homeless, refugees, migrants, indigenous peoples, Stateless people, human rights defenders, and people living under occupation in conflict and war zones.

It is important to take into account the disproportionate impact of the crisis on women and girls due to the existing structural inequalities and to potentiate their leading role in crisis preparedness, response and recovery.