

**Coronabrief:**

## Who Cares? Feminist Responses to the Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has a strong gender dimension. It is increasing women's vulnerabilities and risks in their roles as workers and caregivers. Feminists in India have developed demands to address these issues now and beyond the crisis.

Across Asia, women are being hit hard by the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns and partial shutdowns have dire implications across all strata of society. But informal workers are particularly hard hit, and the majority of those is composed of women, many of them heads of households. The loss of wages deprives those families of money they need for rent and daily necessities, exposing them to hunger, malnutrition and infection.

The pandemic has also exposed the key role of women's unpaid care work for both the economy and society. In Asia, women already spend 4.1 times more of their time on unpaid care work than men. Men across the region spend on average one hour per day on unpaid care work, and just half an hour in India and Pakistan. Under lockdown conditions, in addition to childcare and household chores, women are now confronted with additional responsibilities such as home schooling, more intense care of the sick, and community care.

Furthermore, women who are juggling care responsibilities with the need to earn money are more likely to be self-employed, to work in the informal economy and to have no paid sick leave or other social protection.

Feminist recommendations – What will be left in the post-crisis economy?

The impact of the pandemic on global markets is destroying the livelihoods of women in vulnerable sectors around the world. For those who make it through, their ability to get back on track will be affected by gender, class and race.

Feminists have long been demanding greater recognition of the contribution of women's work to national income, economic growth, national efficiency and productivity. The urgency of this has been emerging with more force as the crisis unfolds. Research on previous pandemics such as Ebola have found a significant negative impact on women's long-term health and economic vulnerability even after the crisis.

Civil society activists worldwide have been quick to raise their concerns, share resources online, call for solidarity and demand gender-responsive state policies to address the

extraordinary challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. UN Women in Asia and the Pacific took stock of the first 100 days of the COVID-19 outbreak in Asia-Pacific, and seeks to ensure that the world post-COVID is built on principles of human rights and gender equality.

The policy recommendations and demands are about inclusion of women and marginalized groups in all aspects of life, including groups particularly vulnerable in many Asian countries such as women migrant and informal workers. For example, special attention should be paid to the gender impact on digitalization and access to information and communication technology in light of the shift to online-education and remote work, which is problematic in the many parts of the region where the digital gender gap is wide. UN Women also recommends more sharing of emerging and good practices from the region to address the challenges.

### Feminists to the rescue

One example of women and feminist groups to engage in the crisis comes from India, where more than 300 groups have come together to demand specific interventions from state and non-state actors:

1. Food security for informal sector daily wage workers, migrant population and women-headed households.
2. Timely access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, such as emergency contraception and safe abortion and supply of menstrual hygiene products. Staff to be trained to recognize signs of domestic violence.
3. Barrier-free access to education ensured through the creation of educational radio programming appropriate for school-age children and expansion of free internet.
4. Encouraging equitable sharing of domestic tasks in explicit terms and through allowances for time off and compensation for all workers.
5. Access to emergency shelters, information and public health information in multiple languages.
6. Access to water and sanitation.
7. Provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) against infection for frontline health workers.
8. Inclusion of women in COVID-19-related decision making of the front-line workers: doctors, nurses, sanitary staff, volunteers of NGOs who are risking their lives.
9. Addressing of domestic violence during COVID-19 lockdown by providing active helplines and immediate intervention.

These measures and recommendations by feminists are not only stepping stones towards more gender equal and just societies, they are crucial for building future resilience of all parts of society for other emergencies and disasters to com