



# Gender-sensitive approaches in the fight against COVID-19: the role of the Parliament

## Policy Brief



This Policy Brief has been developed by OxYGen Foundation within the framework of the project “Modern Parliament for a Modern Armenia,” which aims to strengthen Armenia’s legislature in the implementation of its key functions of developing legislation, ensuring oversight and representation as well as to support the parliament in the application of a new toolset within the system of state governance, thus contributing to the improvement of the quality, transparency, and inclusiveness of its activities and development of gender-sensitive policies.

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# Relevance

Analyses conducted both in Armenia and globally since the start of the pandemic show that it impacts everyone and everywhere. However, different groups of people are influenced differently, and existing inequalities, including gender inequality, expand further. The pandemic has also revealed gaps in social, political, and economic relevance [1]. COVID-19 has had a destructive impact specifically on women. It has also had a negative impact on the progress achieved so far in terms of gender equality and protection of women's rights.

Despite the fact that amid the first days of the pandemic a number of various international organizations had forewarned of the special impact on women, these concerns are yet to be at the core of the decisions adopted in the fight against the pandemic. Whereas, as the UN forecast has put it, "Failing to take into account gendered dimensions in the response to the pandemic will not only exacerbate existing inequalities but also create new ones" [2]

In this regard, it is important that governments' responses to the pandemic initially take into consideration the disproportionate impacts that are felt by men and women. The fact that globally women make up the majority in sectors of healthcare, education, and social services and are at the forefront of the fight against the pandemic and play a crucial role in addressing the crisis, only affirms the need to adopt gender-sensitive approaches in every measure aimed at tackling the pandemic and its effects. In this context, the role of parliaments is underlined as they can take concrete action to mitigate the impact of the pandemic within the scope of their legislative and oversight functions, thus contributing to the protection of the rights of their constituents.

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Research by McKinsey Global Institute has revealed the following:

- Female job loss rates in crisis situations are about 1.8 times higher than male job loss rates globally, at 5.7% versus 3.1%, respectively.
- Women make up 54% of the overall job losses to date.
- Women are on the frontline of the pandemic while also bearing 75% of the unpaid work related to the care of family members, which negatively impacts female involvement in the labor market.

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[1] Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women, 9 APRIL 2020

[https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy\\_brief\\_on\\_covid\\_impact\\_on\\_women\\_9\\_apr\\_2020\\_updated.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_women_9_apr_2020_updated.pdf)

[2] António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations

The present Policy Brief looks to facilitate the introduction of gender-sensitive approaches in the fight against the pandemic in Armenia while pointing out the special role of the parliament to this end. The Policy Brief also aims to contribute to the development and implementation of a policy that will ensure women's participation in the decision-making related to the pandemic.



The first COVID-19 case was detected in Armenia on March 1, 2020. The virus started to spread on March 11, which was followed by a state of emergency in the country. The state of emergency was later changed to a quarantine regime on September 11.

A sharp increase in Coronavirus cases was recorded following the 44-day war launched by Azerbaijan against Artsakh.

The quarantine regime was extended for another 6 months on January 11, with some restrictions being lifted.

According to official data, as of January 11, 2021, the number of Coronavirus cases detected in Armenia amounted to 5.5% of the overall population.

## The rationale of the issue in Armenia

Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of the COVID-19 Outbreak in Armenian Communities conducted in Armenia in May-July 2020 [3], notes of multiple and multi-layer shocks experienced by Armenia's economy amid the pandemic. According to the report, Armenia's population has faced serious issues not limited to healthcare as well as difficulties related to the accessibility of medical care [4]. The shocks of the healthcare system and forced restrictions brought business enterprises to a halt, caused income losses for households and uncertainty for prospects of any income, worsened the level of social welfare of the population. The Rapid Gender Analysis assessment tool [5] used during this research revealed that similar to the global situation, in Armenia, many of the impacts of COVID-19 hit women hardest and cause problems in different sectors.

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[3] Results of the Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of the COVID-19 Outbreak in Armenian Communities. 7500 people from 10 Armenian Marzes (provinces) and capital Yerevan participated in the survey, which was implemented by the UN Office in Armenia with support from the Armenian Government. <https://bit.ly/3c7QDJD>

[4] Official statistics for COVID-19 cases is updated daily and available on the website of the RA Ministry of Health: <https://ncdc.am/coronavirus/confirmed-cases-by-days/>; updated charts for confirmed cases in Armenia are available here: <https://ampop.am/covid19-coronavirus-dynamic-statistics-in-armenia/>

[5] The impact of COVID-19 on women's and men's lives and livelihoods in Europe and Central Asia: Preliminary results from a Rapid Gender Assessment <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/07/the-impact-of-covid19-on-womens-and-mens-lives-and-livelihoods>

The greater vulnerability of women in Armenia during the pandemic is corroborated by other statistical data and a series of expert assessment [6]



**Greater vulnerability of women in the economic sector** is due to the fact that they have bigger participation in sectors impacted worst by the pandemic – services, retail trade, and social services. Women are especially vulnerable to layoffs and loss of livelihoods. Many non-formal sector jobs, including domestic workers, caregivers, and those employed in agriculture are mostly women who are usually left out of social security programs. Loss of employment has a particularly painful impact on single mothers and their households. All of this leads to a significant limitation of economic opportunities for women.



**Significant increase of unpaid work**, which further deepens gender equality with regard to the division of chores in the family. Basically, female employees with children have several types of work: remote work (if they still have it), care for children, homeschooling, care for the elderly, and domestic chores. The problem still persists when quarantine conditions are eased off. This is due to the fact that preschools continue to be unavailable. The resolution of this issue largely depends on the question of whether the current situation will serve as an opportunity to better allocate domestic chores and care for children among women and men in order for them both to be able to go on with their professional lives, or women will continue to bear the brunt of unpaid work at home and most of the care for the elderly, thus jeopardizing their paid jobs.



**The tendency for women to be infected with COVID-19 more frequently**[7] This has been the case in Armenia from the start of the pandemic due to the fact that women make up the majority in all vulnerable groups and business sectors. [8].



According to the Armenian Statistics Committee:

- Women make up 79% of the education sector.
- Women make up 84% of the health and social services sector.
- Women make up 59% of staff of government ministries.

[6] Women in the fight against the pandemic, EQUAL newsletter: <http://project2923331.tilda.ws/>


[7] According to data released by the RA Ministry of Health, as of June 2020, about 60.5% of active cases were women. In August, this figure went up to 62%.


[8] Women and Men in Armenia 2019, RA Statistical Committee


[9] COVID-19 deaths in Armenia: age, gender, chronology <https://ampop.am/covid-19-deaths-in-armenia/>

In addition to that, women do most of the work at home as well, including the care for all family members, shopping, disinfecting, and processing of purchased items ... All of this further enhances the risk of being infected.

On top of this, as of January 10, 2021, the statistics of COVID-19 deaths in Armenia show that 54% of deaths were men, while 46% were women[9]. Furthermore, this pattern is prevalent all across the world[10]. The WHO database shows men make up 58% of COVID-19 deaths. Researchers say[11] that the reasons for a higher fatality rate of men have to do with peculiarities of biological and social behavior as well as other factors that make men more vulnerable.

 **The big number of women in the health sector** (85%) leads to a greater risk of infection. While globally 10% of all cases were health care workers, as of May 2020, this figure was at 13.4% for Armenian health care workers (doctors, nurses, midwives). According to the results[12] of a serological study to test for the presence of COVID-19 antibodies, the prevalence of antibodies among health care workers was on average about three times higher than the prevalence of COVID-19 confirmed by a PCR test used to test the presence of the virus previously.

 **Restriction of maternal health services during a pandemic**, when all services address medical needs associated with the pandemic, poses a great risk to women. According to the data of the rapid assessment of the impact of the pandemic, it is pregnant women, especially those who are in constant need of health services that faced difficulties.

 **Rising cases of domestic abuse during the pandemic** have proved that the measures required to fight the virus, including isolation, social distancing, mobility restrictions are the very conditions in which abusers feel freer to act.

Individuals who were already suffering from domestic abuse found themselves in a graver situation where their homes were never a safe environment and they were no longer able to anticipate help and support due to the inability to communicate with the outside world. The rapid assessment of the government response to domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic conducted in Armenia[13] revealed a number of issues within the response as well as the needs of the government and NGOs when it comes to domestic violence taking place during a state of emergency.

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## State of Emergency Commandant's Office

The State of Emergency Commandant's Office coordinating the fight against the pandemic in Armenia included 15 government representatives, of whom only 2 were women.

[10] Why is gender-disaggregated statistics important? <http://project2923331.tilda.ws/page13670022.html>

[11] <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-gender-gap-men-more-likely-to-die-covid-19-women/>

[12] <https://www.moh.am/#1/3043>

[13] Rapid Assessment of Government Response to Domestic Violence During COVID-19 Pandemic <https://bit.ly/3rqrG2I>



**The low representation of women on the decision-making level** – globally and in Armenia, the vast majority of people involved in the decision-making process related to the development and implementation of measures against the pandemic are men.

In addition to that, female leaders of several countries found themselves in the spotlight of international media thanks to the efficiency of their governance in times of crises, which enabled their swift response to the pandemic as well as low death rates.

Moreover, UN Women “COVID-19 and women’s leadership: From an effective response to building back better” brief highlights the fact that across the globe, women are at the helm of institutions carrying out effective and inclusive COVID-19 responses, from the highest levels of decision-making to frontline service delivery.

The data and facts mentioned above come to affirm the worsening of gender inequality in Armenia, and therefore, the need for adopting gender-sensitive approaches in the fight against the pandemic. Considering Armenia’s parliamentary system of governance, the question is the following: what kind of solutions can the National Assembly and members of parliament provide in order to mitigate the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic and to introduce gender-sensitive approaches in the fight against it?

A valuable resource in this regard is the special issue of the EQUAL Newsletter on “Women in the Fight against the Pandemic”<sup>[14]</sup> released within the framework of the “Modern Parliament for a Modern Armenia” project.

## **The Inter-Parliamentary Union notes the following:**

- By strengthening gender-mainstreaming capacity in parliament now, good practice will not only have a positive impact on decisions taken and measures designed today but will also become the way in which parliamentary business is conducted in the future.
- If parliaments contribute now to ensuring health coverage for all, this will have long-lasting benefits for all, today and in the future.
- If parliaments take the opportunity now to challenge existing stereotypes and the traditional division of work within households and in the economy, this will support the economic empowerment of women and girls for years and generations to come.
- Documenting now the essential role of women in the crisis response, in society and in the economy, will help ensure that these roles are more systematically acknowledged and taken into account in the future.

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[14] <http://project2923331.tilda.ws/>

# Recommendations

It is obvious that the COVID-19 crisis brings forth serious challenges in relation to the deepening of current inequalities within society. However, the crisis may also open new windows of opportunity aimed at the elimination of these inequalities and the establishment of a fairer and more sustainable society in the long-term. Such a resolution is largely incumbent on the stance of the parliament and actions undertaken towards the implementation of gender-sensitive crisis management.

According to the guidance note for parliaments published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union[15] these actions can be taken within the framework of the following approaches:

- Women's participation and leadership in parliaments and other institutions on COVID-19 decision-making processes
- Gender-responsive legislation
- Overseeing the government's COVID-19 response from a gender-sensitive perspective
- The role of MPs in communicating and raising awareness on COVID-19 and its effects

These approaches are in line with the priorities, goals, and actions of the RA Gender Policy Implementation Strategy and Action Plan 2019-2023, and warrant the implementation of the following steps:

- Ensure the equal participation of men and women in the decision-making on COVID-19 within the parliament, including in new working groups and commissions set up due to the pandemic.
- Exercising the oversight function of the parliament, identify the extent of women's participation in the decision-making of all bodies dealing with the pandemic: subdivisions, commissions, working groups, etc.
- Through exchanges with constituents, ensure that opinions and needs of women are heard in the parliament and included in the decisions of parliamentary commissions and legislative initiatives of MPs.
- Identify and present in the parliament all challenges that pose risks in terms of a possible reversal of women's rights. In addition, constantly emphasize the vitality of women's role and initiatives in the fight against the pandemic, thus drawing the attention of the government and society towards a more effective engagement of women's potential.



- ▶ Assess how targeted government policy and measures undertaken have been in terms of excluding discrimination against women and men.
- ▶ Raise before the government the issue of mandatory collection of gender-disaggregated data on the pandemic and its effects based on the requirement of the RA Gender Policy Implementation Strategy 2019-2023[16] which states the following: “maintenance of a gender-disaggregated, coordinated and unified statistics, including on groups receiving state services.”
- ▶ Support the government in structuring its response to COVID-19 and its effects as well as national strategic programs based on gender-disaggregated data and research. Make sure that support programs for health care and economic sectors, hospitals, physicians, small businesses, self-employed people, socially vulnerable families, and other groups have gender-disaggregated data and research as well as results of gender analyses at their core, thus increasing the effectiveness of public health policy and measures aimed at the prevention of epidemics.
- ▶ Insist on a gender expert examination for regulatory as well as draft regulatory frameworks to assess the impact on women and men and provide effective solutions to the issues of both sexes.
- ▶ Support initiatives aiming to improve legislation on combatting domestic violence during the pandemic and introduce more effective mechanisms.
- ▶ Be consistent and attentive with vulnerable groups, including issues of women who suffer the most because of the pandemic. Come up with initiatives that aim to mitigate the economic effects of COVID-19 by emphasizing the need for creating economic opportunities for women.
- ▶ Keep a close eye on issues related to the accessibility of preschool institutions, as well as to ensuring opportunities for a flexible work schedule and paid vacation for working women and men.