

# Gender Equality and Building Back Better

## Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected men and women differently, **exacerbating existing gender inequalities across a range of areas including health, education and livelihoods**. Globally, women and girls are also experiencing increased levels of gender-based violence. The pandemic has highlighted the key role played by women and girls in sustaining human society, as the continuation of health care, education at home, and wellbeing of families rely on the agency exercised by women and girls. There is an urgent need to ensure that emergency response and recovery plans take into account both the immediate and longer-term impacts of Covid-19 on women and girls, otherwise the progress made to date on women's empowerment and gender equality will be lost.

This positioning paper makes **a set of recommendations on the kinds of interventions, investments and partnerships that will ensure that the Covid-19 response in the immediate, medium and long term is gender transformative** with respect to the five key policy priority commitment areas in Ireland's international development policy, *A Better World*. These areas are: sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR); women's economic empowerment (WEE); girls' education; gender-based violence (GBV); and women, peace and security (WPS).

Ireland is committed to reaching those furthest behind first through its development partnerships and interventions. The country's position as a global leader in gender equality is closely connected to this commitment. Ireland promotes a gender-transformative approach across all its partnerships and interventions. How Ireland and other states respond to Covid-19 in the immediate, medium and long term, will determine if we are able to **sustain the gains made in women's empowerment and build back better by creating gender-responsive health care, legal and governance systems, and care-sensitive economies that advance gender equality and reach those furthest behind**.

In the **immediate and short term**, Ireland should build on its existing programmes, partnerships and strengths to do the following:

- **Address gender-specific impacts:** invest in programmes that provide targeted relief to disadvantaged groups and seek to address the specific gendered impacts of Covid-19 on women and girls, including through protecting existing funding and increasing investments in programmes that provide essential basic services (including education, health, social protection, GBV prevention and response) to women and girls.
- **Support local response and women's and girls' voice and agency:** promote women's and girls' voice and agency in Covid-19 response planning and decision-making, including through support for community and locally led response plans, and targeted efforts to ensure that women's organisations are represented and supported, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings.
- **Coordinate and advocate for gender-transformative approaches:** support coordination across key actors and between key sectors on gender equality, and advocate for and support the integration of gender-transformative approaches in national and global emergency response plans.
- **Capacity building:** strengthen capacity, in particular at Mission level, for staff to support gender analysis as part of Ireland's Covid-19 response, and invest in gender training for staff of key partners who are delivering emergency response.

In the **medium and long term**, Ireland should push to create systems that advance the gender equality agenda to build back better:

- **Address gender-specific impacts:** at the Mission level, take the lead to ensure economic response and recovery plans take into account gender-responsive social provisioning to reduce women's care burden, targeted measures to enhance

access to markets, inputs and capital, debt and credit relief, opportunities for participation, skills building, and decent work for women.

- **Support national responses:** support efforts to strengthen national systems for the provision of essential services that meet the specific needs of women and girls, in particular in education and sexual and reproductive health services, and invest in building national systems for the prevention of and response to GBV.
- **Support women's and girls' voice and agency:** provide flexible and adaptive funding, and make space for women's rights organisations to take part in developing national policies and monitoring their implementation. Support efforts to sustain the work of women peacekeepers and foster women's leadership in peace negotiations.
- **Coordinate and advocate for gender-transformative approaches at national level:** at the Mission level, create alliances with like-minded multilateral and civil society partners to sustain a focus on gender equality and women's rights in policy spaces, and advocate for changing discriminatory laws and policies.
- **Coordinate and advocate for gender-transformative approaches at global level:** work with like-minded donors and multilateral partners and non-governmental organisation partners in advancing gender equality on the global stage in support of a build back better agenda that seeks to realise the global commitments in line with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 and for the attainment of the SDGs as a whole.
- **Capacity building:** sustain long-term investment in building Irish Aid staff's own organisational capacity for gender analysis through investment in human, financial and knowledge resources so that these strengthen Ireland's position as a gender equality champion.

# Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is disproportionately affecting the poorest and the most disadvantaged populations around the world. Globally, women and girls already experience significant gender inequalities. About 330 million women and girls live on less than US\$1.90 a day – 4.4 million more than men (UN Women 2018). Evidence demonstrates that crises, including public health emergencies, exacerbate existing gender inequalities (UN Women 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has affected men and women differently with respect to health, education, and loss of livelihoods, and women and girls are also experiencing increased levels of gender-based violence (*ibid.*). If measures are not taken to address both the immediate and longer-term impacts of Covid-19 on women and girls, progress made to date on gender equality will not be sustained.

Ireland has been a leading country promoting gender equality in the global policy space. Gender equality is established as one of the key policy priority areas in Ireland's international development policy, *A Better World*. Ireland promotes **a transformative approach** that seeks to address social and structural causes of gender inequality. *A Better World* adopts a twin-track approach to establish gender equality as a policy priority area by: (a) scaling up Ireland's engagement to integrate an overarching focus on empowerment of women and girls in its development partnerships and



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interventions; and (b) increasing allocations to interventions directly dedicated to achieving gender equality. These targeted interventions include Ireland's work in five policy priority commitment areas: women, peace and security (WPS); gender-based violence (GBV); women's economic empowerment (WEE); girls' education; and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Ireland has also committed to increase its engagement with, and scale up its funding for, women's organisations and movements, and to promote women's voices in political and peace-building processes.

Ireland operates through partnerships with multilateral agencies and civil society organisations (CSOs) in a range of countries, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia and Small Island Developing States (SIDS). These states have diverse capacities to deliver services, governance and health systems. Social norms and cultural practices vary widely in these countries, particularly around women's mobility, inheritance, asset ownership, access to public space and cultural attitudes to GBV. Ireland's emergency response plans to Covid-19 and future global and mission strategies need to be grounded in strong gender analysis that takes into account the diversity in state capacity, and the nature of gendered roles and responsibilities. It also needs to **adopt an intersectional and do-no-harm approach** so that interventions do not perpetuate or exacerbate gender inequalities and reach the **furthest behind first**.

The aim of this positioning paper on gender equality is to make a set of recommendations on the kinds of interventions, investments, and partnerships that promote gender equality to specifically inform Ireland's international development response to Covid-19 in the immediate, medium and long term. The paper draws on existing academic literature, policy briefings, rapid response reports, website materials of United Nations (UN) agencies, inputs from

Institute of Development Studies (IDS) sectoral experts, and interviews and feedback from Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) staff at Headquarters and in Missions. While the framing of this positioning paper addresses Ireland's efforts to advance gender equality through specific policy commitments made in *A Better World*, Ireland is also committed to integrating an overarching focus on women and girls across all interventions and partnerships. The other positioning papers on food systems, governance and social protection, commissioned along with this paper, outline the need to integrate a strong focus on gender equality. They highlight how a focus on cross-sectoral linkages (see *Social Protection and Building Back Better* – Lind, Roelen and Sabates-Wheeler 2020) or gender-inclusive institutions (*Governance and Building Back Better* – Khan Mohmand 2020) in Ireland's work may help to further gender equality.

In the following sections, the paper briefly outlines the gendered impact of Covid-19 on each of the five policy priority commitment areas: SRHR, WEE, girls' education, GBV and the WPS agenda. It also lays out what the key considerations are in each of these areas with respect to: gender equality in emergency response programming; future interventions for reducing gender-specific vulnerabilities and promoting women's and girl's agency; and examples of what has worked. For each of these areas, we discuss the nature of current multilateral responses and actions of



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key global champions.

The concluding section provides a set of recommendations that Ireland may want to consider in the immediate, medium and long term with respect to: addressing the specific impacts on women and girls; supporting local responses, women's voice and agency and women's rights organisations (WROs); supporting coordination among stakeholders across sectors and advocating for gender-transformative approaches in global and national responses; and strengthening capacity to advance gender equality as part of Ireland's response. Short- and medium- to longer-term responses are not separate or linear, but need to be aligned so that the short-term responses support longer-term responses, which can in turn support transformative approaches for advancing gender equality.

## **Priority policy commitment area 1: sexual and reproductive health and rights**

Ireland's commitment to global health focuses on strengthening health systems and expanding access (Government of Ireland 2019b). Ireland's international development policy, *A Better World*, states that it will support global aspirations to attain universal health coverage and end epidemics such

as AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Ireland is committed to enhancing women's and girls' agency and choice with respect to SRHR, through developing a new initiative that improves access to sexual and reproductive health services using a human rights-based approach.

## How has Covid-19 affected women and girls with respect to SRHR?

The onset of Covid-19 has created a challenge for achieving the global aspirations set out in *A Better World*, particularly those focused on SRHR. Experience from previous pandemics demonstrates that efforts to contain outbreaks divert resources from SRHR services (Gender in Humanitarian Action 2020). The current pandemic is disrupting supply chains of modern contraceptives, and delivery of maternal and essential health services, leaving around 47 million women in low- and middle-income countries without access to them (UNFPA 2020a). Women are reluctant to visit health facilities due to restrictions on movement and fears of exposure to Covid-19 (UNFPA 2020f). In many countries, community health-care workers go door to door to provide contraception to women. During lockdown this service is disrupted, making it difficult for women to exercise choice in cases where their partners are unwilling to use contraception (Unnithan *et al.* 2020).

Restricted access to essential SRHR services results in significant impacts on women and girls, especially on those who are most vulnerable, because of the increased unmet need for contraception, unintended pregnancies, and more women dying in childbirth or from undergoing unsafe abortions (UNFPA 2020f).

Women represent nearly 70 per cent of health-care workers globally, including those on the frontline of the Covid-19 response (UNFPA 2020a). However, attention to their needs in terms of protection and workload has been limited, and they have been under-represented in planning emergency responses (*ibid.*). As evidence shows, women frontline



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workers' needs are less likely to be met when they are under-represented in global and national health decision-making processes (World Bank 2020).

## What are the key gender equality considerations in investment and programming with respect to SRHR?

When health systems are overwhelmed, countries need to make difficult decisions to balance the demands of responding directly to Covid-19, while simultaneously engaging in strategic planning and coordinated action to maintain essential health service delivery. Women's choices and rights to sexual and reproductive health care, however, should be respected regardless of Covid-19 status. Ireland should support efforts to ensure that SRHR is included in short- and longer-term response plans, and promote a coordinated approach between governments and donors. Building on existing programmes, partnerships and Ireland's comparative advantage, key considerations for Ireland's support to SRHR in Covid-19 response include the following.

### **Prioritising continuity for the provision of essential SRHR services, including through the use of mobile technology**

In response to Covid-19, focused responses are required to ensure continuity of essential SRHR services and protect gains made in sexual and reproductive health to date, including contraception and family planning services and clinical management services for survivors of GBV (WHO, UNICEF and IFRC 2020). Provision of family planning and other sexual and reproductive health medications and commodities, such as menstrual health items, needs to be continued.

### **Training and equipping community health workers**

Community health workers need to be adequately trained and equipped in order to provide accurate family planning information and other methods that do not require the supervision of health workers during the Covid-19 pandemic (WHO *et al.* 2020).

A good example of innovative practice of outreach is the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)'s distribution of 'dignity kits' to women and girls in **Mozambique, Palestine and Timor-Leste**, consisting of reusable menstrual pads and hygiene products. This will enable most disadvantaged groups of women and girls to use their limited resources to purchase other important items needed in an emergency, such as food, and facilitate their mobility to access services (UNFPA 2020e). Mobile technology can be used to provide these services. In **Mozambique**, a new pilot project will distribute mobile phone e-vouchers to women and girls, enabling them to purchase their own sanitary and menstrual hygiene materials (*ibid.*).

### **Ensuring women frontline workers are participating in decision-making processes**

Women providing health care on the frontline need to be included in local and national decision-making processes to improve detection of Covid-19 cases, provision of treatment and information about prevention practices (Gender in Humanitarian Action 2020).

### **Consulting and supporting WROs**

WROs working on SRHR at grass-roots and national levels need to be consulted and supported to provide their inputs into the design, delivery and distribution of resources. Their inclusion is not stressed by all donors, but there are exceptions. For instance, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) is funding youth mentoring programmes to address SRHR needs (UNFPA 2020d). Ireland should play a role in advocating for and supporting the inclusion of WROs in the Covid-19 response on SRHR.

### **Targeting disadvantaged groups and adolescent girls**

SRHR programming in refugee camps, urban slums and other areas needs to target vulnerable and marginalised women who face

multiple forms of disadvantage because of poverty, racial, ethnic and class inequality, as well as sexual orientation and gender identity (Call to Action 2020). Women and girls with disabilities are often excluded from SRHR programming. Responses should include specific action to meet their SRHR needs. For adolescent girls, the provision of menstrual hygiene products and contraception, advice on safe sex practice, and protection from sexual abuse should be priorities in national and local response plans.

### **Supporting the multilateral response in addressing the SRHR needs of women and girls**

The multilateral response is emphasising the need to continue SRHR services, particularly maternal health, and post- and antenatal care, as well as reproductive health through access to contraception, menstrual hygiene products and safe abortion. Ireland supports key partnerships that are addressing SRHR in the Covid-19 response. Ireland should continue to work with these multilateral and bilateral partners so that SRHR remains integrated within their Covid-19 response including the European Union (EU), UNFPA, World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the

UNFPA is the key agency championing the gender equality agenda in the Covid-19 response to SRHR. Under its Global Response Plan, UNFPA has ongoing interventions to address SRHR needs during the Covid-19 pandemic in the following priority countries: **Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, Palestine, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Timor-Leste, Uganda, Vietnam and Zambia** (UNFPA 2020a). Collaboration with UNFPA in these countries is an opportunity for Ireland to strengthen the gender equality agenda with respect to SRHR. In addition, UNFPA has launched three Thematic Funds to respond to Covid-19 challenges: UNFPA Supplies, Maternal and Newborn Health, and Population Data (UNFPA 2020g).

Empowerment of Women (UN Women), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and regional development banks (World Bank 2020a; UNFPA 2020c; WHO 2020).

### **Advocating a rights-based approach to sexual and reproductive health**

Recent years have seen a significant pushback against SRHR in the global policy space, as well as attempts to row back against and weaken established language on sexual and reproductive health in international commitments. At global level, Ireland should work with like-minded partners to protect and strengthen commitments on SRHR in international intergovernmental negotiations and ensure that sexual health services are

recognised as essential to the UN's commitment to universal health coverage in health emergencies and in building robust health systems (UN Women 2018).<sup>1</sup> At the Mission level, Ireland should engage with other donors, partner governments and CSOs working on SRHR to ensure full and unimpeded access to sexual and reproductive health services for all women and girls, including the provision of SRHR services in national Covid-19 response plans.

### **Supporting evidence-based responses to the SRHR impact of Covid-19**

UNFPA and partners have developed a tracking matrix for monitoring the disruption of services in the countries where they work, which is a useful tool for Ireland to understand delivery gaps and gendered impacts (UNFPA 2020b).

## **Priority policy commitment area 2: women's economic empowerment**

*A Better World* makes explicit commitments to creating opportunities for women's participation in the economy. Ireland is committed to creating a new funding initiative for WEE, with an explicit focus on agriculture and women in small-scale businesses (Irish Aid 2020). Ireland places an emphasis on mitigating the impact of the disproportionate share of unpaid care work that limits economic engagement and education of women and girls, and changing harmful social norms that limit women's participation (*ibid.*). Ireland is committed to supporting inclusive economic growth and developing social protection systems to address economic vulnerabilities of female-headed households, women and girls in humanitarian contexts, and victims of climate shocks.

### **How has Covid-19 affected the possibilities for WEE?**

Covid-19 has created a challenge for achieving the commitments set out in *A Better World*,

as the global economy is being hit hard, and as families from lower-income groups are experiencing loss of income, illness and various other shocks.

The economic impact of the pandemic is greater for women in the informal sector, in agriculture, migrant workers and female-headed households than for women in formal sector work, and also compared to men. In urban areas, domestic workers, market traders, street vendors, home-based workers and waste pickers do not have legal protection and are not always targeted as beneficiaries of social protection programmes (Durant 2020). In rural areas, opportunities for women farmers and traders to market products are limited due to travel restrictions. Women farmers are experiencing loss of income and depletion of their savings (UN Women 2020e). As they do not have formal ownership of land in many countries, securing credit and investment will be difficult for them

<sup>1</sup> For example, building on Ireland's signature of the joint statement on Protecting Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Promoting Gender-responsiveness in the Covid-19 Crisis.

in the recovery phase. Women migrant workers in low-paid and vulnerable jobs are also experiencing loss of income. Lastly, female-headed households are most vulnerable to falling below the poverty line. In some countries, because of biased customary laws regarding women's inheritance, women who are widowed when their husbands die from Covid-19 are at risk of disinheritance (Decker, Van de Velde and Montalvao 2020).

Women around the world balance domestic chores, childcare, elderly care and income-generating activities. School closures have intensified women's childcare responsibilities and limited their scope to engage in paid employment. Women are also the main carers of those infected by Covid-19 at home. In general, they are working longer hours, becoming physically tired and experiencing income loss. Evidence shows that this economic insecurity will last much longer for women compared to men once travel and other forms of restrictions on economic engagement are lifted (Moussié and Staab 2020). In addition, the climate crisis will continue to unfold during the pandemic, affecting the agricultural sector and thus having a negative impact on women's livelihoods. Climate change will also reduce opportunities for employment in green economy sectors, where women constitute a significant share of the labour force (UN Women 2020g).

### **What are the key gender equality considerations in investment and programming with respect to WEE?**

As the global economy is hit hard and poor families face economic and social insecurity, countries will have to make difficult choices in balancing expansion of social welfare with regenerating the economy. Economic response and recovery plans provide an opportunity to strengthen women's participation in the economy, minimise economic impact and create inclusive economic systems. Building on existing programmes and partnerships, key considerations for Ireland's support to WEE in the Covid-19 response include the following.



## **Economic response and recovery plans provide an opportunity to strengthen women's participation in the economy, minimise economic impact and create inclusive economic systems.**

### **Expanding social protection coverage to address the immediate and longer-term socioeconomic impacts of Covid-19**

The expansion of cash transfer programmes, pensions or social insurance should include informal workers, migrant workers and female-headed households (Moussié and Staab 2020). Innovative practices have focused on transferring cash to these groups through alternative delivery channels, such as self-help groups or grass-roots WROs (*ibid.*). Unconditional social protection programmes

There are many good examples of how social protection programmes can be adapted to address women's needs. Ireland is supporting social protection programmes that meet the specific needs of women and girls as part of the Covid-19 response. In **Zambia**, the cash transfer programme for informal workers in urban settings specifically targets women. In **Kenya**, Ireland is supporting an emergency cash transfer programme that also seeks to integrate key GBV services. In **Ethiopia**, where Ireland has led on the development of a gender strategy for the national Productive Safety Net Programme, the programme is being adapted to respond to women's needs in the context of Covid-19. Programmes that support WEE and private sector engagement are also being adapted. In **Kenya**, on the border with Uganda, Ireland is supporting Trade Mark East Africa to support the establishment of 'safe trade zones' for female traders affected by Covid-19.



that do not make women responsible for meeting targets by adding to their workload should be promoted, as well as generating employment through public work programmes (Cookson 2018; Özler 2020).

### **Supporting provision of cash grants, agricultural inputs and addressing investment needs of women farmers**

Ireland may consider supporting programmes that provide agricultural inputs and extension services to enable women farmers to increase their productivity (Decker *et al.* 2020). Also, training and local networks of female farmers are necessary to help market their crops (*ibid.*). Larger cash transfers or deferral of credit payments can help women farmers to weather the current crisis and recover economically (World Bank 2020b).

### **Supporting schemes and programmes that address gender-biased norms and women's care needs**

Women's unpaid care burden needs to be addressed when designing economic recovery programmes, or WEE may not be sustained in the long run (Chopra and Zambelli 2017). Social protection programmes and public work schemes in many countries have successfully integrated childcare components to reduce the burden on women from lower-income groups (Roelen and Karki Chettri 2016). These programmes may also include men, to shift the burden of care at home and the perception that childcare is a woman's task (Sida 2019).

### **Consulting and supporting WROs, informal workers' unions and small farmers' collectives**

At the national level, economic response and recovery planning processes need to engage WROs and feminist scholars

Many public work schemes include successful integration of childcare components. The Karnali Employment Programme in **Nepal** has childcare facilities at work sites, which has reduced the burden for individual women from poorer households participating in the scheme (Roelen and Karki Chettri).



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to understand how financial systems may address vulnerabilities experienced by informal workers, women farmers or migrant workers (UNCTAD 2019). At the grass-roots and local levels, involving leaders of women farmers' cooperatives and women members of informal unions may facilitate inclusion of their demands in recovery plans. Ireland should play a role in supporting WROs in planning the Covid-19 response and holding governments to account.

### **Advocating for and supporting gender-responsive economic recovery plans**

At the national level, Ireland should advocate for integrating a gender lens in the way economic recovery and financial policy responses are designed and implemented. At the global level, Ireland should support multilaterals, such as UN Women, in their response to Covid-19 which has a clear focus on care and decent work for women. Both the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UN Women are supporting governments to implement gender-responsive policy responses to the Covid-19 crisis and recovery phase, as part of the UN Women-ILO Joint Programme 'Promoting decent employment for women through inclusive growth policies and investments in the care economy'.

### **Supporting key multilateral actors championing WEE**

The key multilateral actors championing the WEE agenda are UN Women, the World Bank and ILO. UN Women is implementing a range of programmes that focus on three key areas: developing adequate public policies; providing support to care workers, including domestic workers; and behaviour change

communication campaigns (UN Women 2020a). With the ILO and UNICEF, UN Women has issued guidance on family-friendly policies and practices in the workplace during the pandemic (UNICEF, ILO and UN Women 2020). The World Bank advocates a clear focus on providing a fiscal stimulus for women farmers in the recovery response, with debt relief, credit packages, provision of inputs, and helping to develop market connections (World Bank 2020b). Ireland should consider engaging with these multilateral agencies at the Mission level to advance the WEE agenda.

### **Supporting evidence-based responses to the impact of Covid-19 on WEE**

UN Women, ILO and the World Bank have created databases that can be used by

Ireland to understand how Covid-19 affects women in the informal sector. Through the Africa Gender Innovation Lab, the World Bank Group is generating evidence on mechanisms that can help protect the lives and livelihoods of women and girls at household and farm levels in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Gender Innovation Lab 2020). As part of the World Bank Group, the International Finance Corporation has published two guides for employers in the context of Covid-19: one related to GBV in the workplace (IFC 2020b); and the other to support employees' care and family needs (IFC 2020a). Ireland should use these resources to plan its response in sub-Saharan Africa and other partner countries.

## **Priority policy area 3: girls' education**

Ireland is committed to improving access to quality education as a human right for all children, especially for girls, and ensuring access to education in humanitarian contexts. With respect to gender equality, Ireland is committed to expanding access to quality education for girls through strengthening education systems in remote and poorly served areas, and supporting community school initiatives. Ireland also emphasises targeted scholarships and social protection measures to prevent dropout of adolescent girls and boys from low-income families. In humanitarian and conflict-affected contexts, Ireland is committed to continuity of education for children and young people, especially adolescent girls.

### **How has Covid-19 affected girls' education?**

Because of the lockdown, school closures, and disparities in access to digital and financial resources, Covid-19 has created several interconnected challenges to continuity of education for boys and girls. As of June 2020, nationwide school closures affected 771 million

children in developing countries (GPE 2020a). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) estimates that 20 years of gains made in girls' education could be reversed if responses do not prioritise the needs of adolescent girls (Giannini and Albrechtsen 2020).

Evidence from previous public health outbreaks shows that school closures, especially in low-income settings, exacerbate existing inequalities in education, including gender equalities, and put adolescent girls at increased risk. Families may marry girls off early due to additional economic pressures during a health pandemic (*ibid.*). There is also a high risk of girls been trafficked as a result of breakdowns in law and order (*ibid.*). All of this



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may then lead to a rise in incidents of sexual abuse, unwanted early pregnancies and forced marriages (Plan International 2020a). UNFPA estimates that between 2020 and 2030, an estimated additional 13 million child marriages will take place as a result of disruption of schooling and related impacts (UNFPA 2020f).

There were already over 130 million girls not in school prior to the pandemic (Malala Fund 2020). Experience from previous crises shows that adolescent girls are considerably less likely than boys to return to school following a prolonged absence (Plan International 2020a). Structural inequalities can cause girls' education to be deemed less valuable than for their male counterparts, with adolescent girls often expected to assume unpaid carer roles within families (World Bank 2020b). This kind of disruption in formal schooling will affect outcomes of other development programmes that target adolescent girls; for example, programmes on early child marriage prevention (UNFPA 2020f). This will have a long-term impact on girls' engagement in income-generating activities, health outcomes and levels of participation in the public sphere (UNESCO 2020a).

The digital gender disparity, including girls' more limited access to phones and the internet in many countries, also means that they are disproportionately disadvantaged in accessing education services that are promoted through technologies (World Bank 2020b).

## **What are the key gender equality considerations in investment and programming with respect to girls' education?**

As the education sector is widely affected by Covid-19, countries are trying to balance continuing the safe delivery of education, while simultaneously engaging in strategic planning and coordinated action to ensure quality and develop inclusive education systems. Adolescent girls' choices and right to education should be respected regardless of Covid-19 status. Building on existing programmes, partnerships and comparative

advantage, key considerations for Ireland's support to girls' education in the Covid-19 response include the following.

### **Supporting continuity of education through distance learning, flexible/adaptive practices, online learning and the inclusive education agenda**

At the Mission level, Ireland should support distance learning programmes, invest in reducing the digital gender disparity, promote flexible learning approaches, and consult teachers and communities on the best way forward (Giannini and Albrechtsen 2020). Promotion of flexible learning approaches is critical for girls to balance increased domestic and care responsibilities. Ireland should promote other types of technology such as community radio or TV programmes for delivery of lessons in places where internet access is limited (*ibid.*; Mundy and Hare 2020).

Ireland should advocate for the inclusive education agenda by drawing attention to the needs of disabled children and children in camps for refugees and internally displaced people. Opportunities to connect with peers, gain access to safe and child-friendly spaces, and engage in creative play can be stressed (Plan International 2020b). In certain contexts in sub-Saharan Africa, pregnant girls are not allowed back into schools or to sit exams (Amnesty International 2020). In the post-Covid-19 scenario, the risk of unwanted pregnancies is high and Ireland should advocate to change these restrictive policies.

### **Supporting social protection programmes to address financial constraints and encourage data collection at the school level**

Ireland should invest in social protection programmes that specifically target education, to address these financial barriers to accessing



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education (Winthrop and Jenkins 2020). It should also support national governments to develop data systems and support schools to monitor re-enrolment and collect sex-disaggregated data on re-enrolment to assess whether girls' enrolment is on a par with or above pre-crisis levels.

### **Supporting programmes that provide essential services through schools**

Free school meals are a key source of nutrition for children and should be continued where possible. Ireland should also prioritise investing in child protection measures and welfare services including psychological support structures, and delivery of sexual and reproductive health services (hygiene products, etc.) for adolescent girls.

### **Consulting children and investing in leadership building**

Children, and girls in particular, need to be centrally involved in planning and decision-making at the local level. Ireland should stress that implementing partners should consult with children (Johnson and Lewin 2020). Existing child rights organisations that promote girls agency and leadership should be involved in planning delivery of education where possible (Giannini and Albrechtsen 2020).

### **Advocating for gender-responsive education sector planning as a key focus for Covid-19 response plans that meet the specific needs of all children, including girls**

National response plans should provide clear timelines for the reopening of schools and assurances on measures to protect the health and safety of students, their families and communities.

### **Advocating to ringfence education funding**

At the Mission level, Ireland should advocate for national governments to safeguard education



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**The key multilateral actor championing gender equality in education is the Global Partnership for Education.** The World Bank is its Secretariat and donors, including Ireland, act as grant agents (GPE 2020b). The Covid-19 Response Fund (US\$500m) supports distance learning programmes that prioritise the most disadvantaged children, including girls with special needs and disabilities, and those without access to electricity or the internet (*ibid.*). It covers 67 countries, including Ireland's priority countries: **Ethiopia, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda, Vietnam** and **Zambia**. Increased collaboration in this partnership will further strengthen Ireland's lead position in girls' education and go towards meeting its commitment of €250m by 2024.

funding and ensure that social services essential to protecting children including health, education and social protection, are not in competition with each other.

### **Supporting the multilateral response to Covid-19 to ensure gender equality in education**

Ireland should build on existing multilateral partnerships such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and Education Cannot Wait, and work with other UN partners including UNICEF and UNESCO to support gender equality within the global response to Covid-19. Ireland has already established itself as a global leader for adolescent girls' education through the campaign 'The Drive for Five: A Call to Action for the Education of Adolescent Girls', in partnership with UN Women, GPE, ONE and the Malala Fund. This represents a key opportunity to respond to the challenges to girls' education posed by the pandemic. Ireland may choose to work with donors that focus on changing social norms.

### **Supporting evidence-based responses to address the impact of Covid-19 on girls' education**

The Global Education Coalition for Covid-19 launched by UNESCO monitors school closures

caused by the pandemic. Sex-disaggregated data for different levels of education are available online (UNESCO 2020b). The World Bank also reports on this information and maintains a site with updated resources on

the effects of the pandemic on the education sector (World Bank 2020c). These are important sources for Ireland to understand the gendered impact on the delivery of education and planning the response.

## Priority policy area 4: gender-based violence

Ireland recognises GBV as a fundamental breach of human rights. It stresses that preventing and combatting all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls is crucial to achieving gender equality and empowerment. In *A Better World*, Ireland commits to intensifying work on preventing and responding to GBV through collaboration with, and support for, Irish and international stakeholders (Government of Ireland 2019a). In *A Better World*, particular emphasis is placed on addressing GBV in conflict and post-conflict settings aligned with policy priorities (Government of Ireland 2019b) (also addressed in the [following section on WPS](#)).

### How has Covid-19 exacerbated GBV?

GBV is pervasive during normal times. It is a product of unequal gender power relations and gender discrimination, which are exacerbated by conflict and humanitarian crises, poverty and economic stress. Emerging data show that since the outbreak of Covid-19, reports of violence against women, and particularly domestic violence, have increased (Nazneen 2020). Existing tension among family members is aggravated by the living conditions in a lockdown situation and where women are unable to leave the family home (UN Women 2020b).

As resources are diverted to address Covid-19-related emergencies, services that address the needs of survivors of violence are being cut, as well as funding for awareness-raising programmes on GBV (*ibid.*). This will have a long-term negative impact and, in the short run, will lead to a rise in the number of deaths

(Nazneen, Hickey and Sifaki 2019). Also, certain categories of women and girls may be more vulnerable to risks of sexual abuse as law and order situations worsen (Nazneen 2020). As families face increased economic pressure, adolescent girls, refugee women in camps, women and girls in conflict-affected areas, and undocumented migrant women workers may fall victim to human traffickers (UN Women 2020b).

### What are the key gender equality considerations in investment and programming with respect to tackling GBV?

Ireland is already working through a range of partners at the global and national levels in preventing and responding to GBV. It is essential that support for the provision of essential GBV services is maintained and strengthened in the context of Covid-19, and that global and national response efforts include targeted action on GBV and ensure that GBV mitigation efforts are integrated across sector responses. Building on existing programmes, partnerships and comparative advantage, key considerations for Ireland's support to GBV programmes and services in the Covid-19 response include the following.



**It is essential that support for the provision of essential GBV services is maintained and strengthened in the context of Covid-19.**

### **Supporting partners to adapt and maintain the provision of essential GBV services, especially those most likely to be furthest behind**

Existing services for providing health and social care, legal aid and shelter should be continued. Emergency response programmes addressing the Covid-19 pandemic should also include mental health and psychosocial support for survivors of violence (Unnithan *et al.* 2020). It is critical that GBV is designated as an 'essential service' by national governments in the context of lockdown restrictions to ensure continued provision of services.

### **Supporting flexible funding for WROs**

The frontline role of WROs has been critical in the context of Covid-19. Engaging with them

Across Missions in key partner countries, Ireland has been working with international and local partners to adapt and maintain essential GBV services in light of Covid-19. In **Zambia**, support is being provided through the UN Joint Programme on GBV to expand the delivery of emergency shelter services for survivors of GBV. In **South Africa**, Ireland is working with UN Women on the development of rapid referral systems for survivors of GBV. In **Liberia** and **Zimbabwe**, Ireland is supporting partners working at the community level to prevent and respond to GBV. In **Sierra Leone**, Ireland is supporting government efforts to roll out one-stop centres that provide critical response services, and is working with UNFPA to adapt programmes that establish safe spaces for adolescent girls out of school. In **Tanzania**, support for WROs working with communities to change social norms in relation to gender justice is being adapted to include specific interventions related to Covid-19 and conflict prevention. In **Kenya**, Ireland is supporting efforts to integrate GBV programming as an essential component within the Covid-19 social protection emergency response.

is essential in long-term planning on how to tackle GBV at the community level. Support should be provided to create space for WROs to contribute to and monitor national efforts to tackle GBV. In Sierra Leone, Ireland is supporting platforms that bring together women leaders to address GBV. In Tanzania, Ireland is supporting WROs and ensuring continued provision of GBV services at the community level.

### **Supporting adapted ways of working and creative use of technology**

Where restrictions are in place, partners can be supported in moving towards adapted service delivery; for example, by moving to the provision of remote initial case management and supporting individual rather than group counselling sessions. Digital technology can also be used to issue protection orders and to ensure that due processes are followed to protect victims of violence (Grey Ellis 2020). Through creative use of technology, populations that may be hard to reach can be targeted. In Mozambique and Zimbabwe, the EU Spotlight Initiative is providing mobile GBV clinics to support service provision in rural communities.

### **Training service providers, frontline health and humanitarian workers to fight GBV**

Ireland should work with partners to support inclusion of messages on GBV prevention in materials on Covid-19 prevention, particularly those produced for health and humanitarian workers. It can also support efforts to collect



**Where restrictions are in place, partners can be supported in moving towards adapted service delivery... [and] through creative use of technology, populations that may be hard to reach can be targeted.**

data on the prevalence of GBV to assess the impact of Covid-19 on this issue (Unnithan *et al.* 2020). Ireland should assist in training social and health-care staff, police, and the judiciary on taking an intersectional approach to understand how the crisis increases the risk of GBV for different groups of women, depending on their class, race, ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation and location.

### **Advocating for and supporting a gender-transformative approach to tackle GBV**

It remains a critical need to support programmes that seek to tackle the root causes of GBV and gender inequality. At the national level, Ireland should support programmes that seek to identify and challenge gender stereotypes and roles, and social norms around gender and violence, while promoting prosocial and equitable behaviour. Ireland should incorporate key stakeholders in programming, including women and girls, men and boys and faith-based leaders; and invest in medium- and longer-term approaches to tackle the root causes of gender inequality, and strategies that work to prevent violence against women and children.

At the global level, Ireland has taken into account the UN Secretary-General's Global Appeal on Violence Against Women and the Covid-19 pandemic. Given Ireland's strong record on addressing GBV in humanitarian settings, it is well placed to advocate for a coordinated and sustained focus on GBV within the UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP). As a contributor to this plan, Ireland is advocating and ensuring that GBV is properly reflected within global- and national-level humanitarian response plans. Ireland is also ensuring that funding for GBV as part of the humanitarian response is properly tracked and reported. Ireland has a key role to play as a strong voice in ensuring that GBV is prioritised as part of the global humanitarian voice, through coordination mechanisms such as the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies and supporting operationalisation of the GBV Accountability Framework.

### **Supporting multilateral actors addressing GBV**

The key multilateral actors addressing GBV are UN Women and UNFPA. In addition to participating in the GHRP, UN Women and UNFPA have taken other measures to ensure GBV is addressed in the Covid-19 response. UN Women runs the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women (UNTF) which supports grass-roots women's organisations to address the impact of Covid-19 on GBV (UNTF 2020b).

Ireland is a significant contributor to the fund. Through the Spotlight Initiative, an alliance between the UN and the EU, the UNTF is providing additional financial assistance to 44 CSOs with a primary focus on institutional strengthening, risk mitigation and survivor recovery in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (UNTF 2020a). The Spotlight Initiative will have greater funding flexibility as these programmes are identified as models for the post-pandemic future (*ibid.*).

Currently, the UNTF is funding projects in Ethiopia, Liberia, Malawi, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. In addition, UN Women has launched a complementary gender programme to respond to the needs of the most crisis-affected and at-risk women and girls in humanitarian settings (UN Women 2020d). UNFPA is also supporting the adaptation of GBV services and implementing GBV prevention and mitigation measures. Maintaining collaborations with these actors will strengthen Ireland's response on GBV.

### **Supporting evidence-based responses to address the impact of Covid-19 on GBV**

UN Women is collecting gender data under the Covid-19 section stored in the Women Count data hub (UN Women 2020c). To strengthen national capacity to track GBV, UN Women is working with WHO under the Global Joint Programme 'Strengthening methodologies and measurement and building national capacities for violence against women data', and has produced guidance notes and briefs on tracking the impact of Covid-19 on GBV (UN Women and WHO 2020). These are important sources for Ireland to understand the extent of GBV and train partner organisations.

# Priority policy area 5: women, peace and security

*A Better World* states that Ireland will develop a more comprehensive response to peace and security challenges. Ireland is committed to focusing on the 'nexus' of interactions between peace, humanitarian and development processes, and will focus on the areas of WPS and GBV in peacekeeping and conflict-affected settings. In promoting women's engagement in mediation, peace-building and conflict resolution, Ireland works with local partners to highlight the distinct impact of conflict on women and girls, and the importance of women's participation in leadership and decision-making in conflict and post-conflict situations. In 2019, the Irish government launched Ireland's Third National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and related resolutions (Government of Ireland 2019c). This sets out a five-year agenda to strengthen Ireland's work in achieving gender equality in conflict-affected contexts. An integral part of the action plan is its focus on the role men and boys can play in challenging social and cultural contexts that are harmful to women. Ireland also provides specific funding for GBV in emergencies. As outlined in *A Better World*, it commits to step up its work with partners to ensure that gender and GBV are prioritised in emergency responses.

## **How does Covid-19 exacerbate gender-specific vulnerabilities in conflict-affected settings?**

Humanitarian crises and conflict settings disproportionately impact women and girls, and increase the risk of sexual violence and GBV. Women and girls in disasters, armed conflict and other situations of violence face increased risks of rape, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, early and forced marriage, sexual exploitation and trafficking. Women and girls in situations of displacement and living in refugee camps are particularly



**Given women's key role in addressing Covid-19, promoting women's and girls' voice and agency in implementing the women, peace and security agenda, and addressing sexual and gender-based violence in humanitarian settings, have gained new urgency.**

vulnerable (Naraghi Anderlini 2020). Despite the scale and severity of GBV in emergencies, prevention and response both continue to be under-resourced.

Covid-19 outbreaks are likely to have an impact on the provision of humanitarian support services, peace operations and ongoing efforts at diplomacy to prevent and resolve conflict. Women and girls may be excluded from consultation processes related to humanitarian responses to Covid-19 and peace-building processes, because of their low social position within their communities (Gender in Humanitarian Action 2020). Women constitute the majority of frontline health workers and caregivers, and are often among first responders in humanitarian crises (Kann 2018). Therefore, they are also exposed to a higher risk of infection. Covid-19 has increased the workload of women as they try to ensure hygiene within the family, and take care of children or the elderly while performing tasks as first responders (UN Women 2020f). Given women's key role in addressing Covid-19, promoting women's and girls' voice and agency in implementing the WPS agenda, and addressing sexual and GBV in humanitarian settings, have gained new urgency.



## **What are the key gender equality considerations in investment and programming with respect to the WPS agenda?**

Ireland is already working through a range of partners at the global and national levels in addressing gender-specific vulnerabilities in conflict-affected settings. Building on existing programmes, partnerships and comparative advantage, key considerations for Ireland's role in mitigating gender-specific vulnerabilities in conflict-affected contexts and promoting women's role in conflict resolution include the following.

### **Providing targeted relief and services that address the specific needs of women and girls in fragile and conflict-affected settings**

To mitigate Covid-19's impact on disadvantaged groups in these settings, Ireland should build on existing partnerships and continue its support of delivery of humanitarian assistance that provides targeted relief and services, including displaced and refugee populations. It can ensure that programmes take into account the provision and continuity of education for girls and boys; provision of services such as water and sanitation; and address specific health needs of women and girls, such as maternal health care and menstrual hygiene products.

### **Implementing protection and prevention measures to address GBV**

Ireland should continue programmatic support in the creation of safe spaces, as sexual violence and GBV are exacerbated in conflict-affected and fragile contexts. The humanitarian response to address the impact of Covid-19 on displaced and refugee populations needs to create and sustain existing safe spaces for women and girls in conflict-affected areas and camps, as well as continuing health and counselling services for survivors of sexual violence and GBV (Call to Action 2020). Programming also needs to consider developing messaging in local languages to raise awareness about GBV and its impact, and to identify and strengthen protection measures

implemented at the community level to reduce the risk of sexual violence and GBV (Gender in Humanitarian Action 2020).

### **Supporting gender-sensitive conflict and risk analysis within the Covid-19 response**

Ireland needs to support gender analysis of the causes and consequences of crises, and mapping of stakeholders and actors. Both are crucial to ensure adequate preparation, mitigation, response and recovery from Covid-19. Community networks established during peace-building efforts can support the design and implementation of community engagement around Covid-19. At the Mission level, Ireland needs to build the capacity of implementing partners to conduct gender risk analysis, as well as supporting dedicated programmes. Ireland also needs to engage other stakeholders beyond implementing partners through dialogues to consult local UN offices for technical advice.

### **Advocating for and supporting women peace-builders and WROs in response planning and conflict resolution, and championing women's engagement in local mediation and peace processes through the WPS framework**

The knowledge of local women's groups and women peace-builders can inform and improve community-focused interventions that meet the specific needs of women and girls in crises and conflict-affected settings. Women peace-builders bring a unique set of skills because of their deep engagement within the community and their ability to allay fears and find practical solutions. They are able to highlight the gendered impact of the pandemic and reach different categories of people, as they are trusted by communities.

Their local networks can be used to reach people with messages against GBV, the need for community mediation, conflict resolution and so forth. Given their familiarity with local contexts and cultures, women peace-builders are able to tailor messaging to their local audiences, both through online platforms and local media (Naraghi Anderlini 2020). At the national level, Ireland needs to advocate for and create space for WROs and female

Ireland is a part of the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies, a multi-stakeholder platform created to support women's leadership and participation to tackle how GBV is addressed in humanitarian emergencies (Call to Action n.d.). The platform informs partners to ensure the leadership and meaningful participation of women and girls in Covid-19 response planning and decision-making, and dedicates adequate and flexible resources to address GBV (Call to Action 2020).

peace-builders to engage in peace talks, peacekeeping processes, local mediation, and in developing humanitarian response plans.

### **Supporting funding for grass-roots WROs and women's leadership**

Through flexible and adaptive funding Ireland should support WROs to focus on opportunities that promote women-led local community-based peace-building work in addressing social norms that are root causes of violence against women and girls. Also, by working with WROs Ireland needs to support the implementation of targeted programmes to empower women and girls to equitably and meaningfully participate in peace and security discussions, and engage with and inform Covid-19 response and recovery plans.

### **Strengthening existing multilateral partnerships for a coordinated global response on promoting WPS within the Covid-19 response**

Ireland should leverage its multilateral partnerships including at the EU and its upcoming membership of the UN Security Council to support the implementation of the WPS agenda within the Covid-19 response. Ireland's membership of the Security Council presents a significant opportunity to engage in policy settings around mitigating the impact of Covid-19 in fragile and conflict-affected settings. Ireland should promote gender equality in these settings through the application of the WPS agenda and ensuring the principles of prevention, protection and meaningful participation and leadership of women. Building on existing humanitarian

partnerships and programmes at the Mission level, Ireland should integrate a specific focus on advancing the WPS agenda as part of its international development response.

### **UN Women and the International Rescue Committee are key actors in promoting the WPS agenda and gender equality in conflict-affected settings**

UN Women has led the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)'s interim guidance on the Gender Alert for Covid-19 Outbreak, which sets the minimum standards for integrating gender equality into preparedness and response planning processes (IASC 2020), and its Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based

Ireland has supported UNSCR 1325 by increasing financial support to agencies implementing its objectives, particularly UN Women and the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF). The fund was extremely swift in responding to the new needs arising from the pandemic, opening an emergency fund window and urging their donors to provide core funding in order to be able to quickly respond to the unpredictable challenges women are facing today in these peculiar times. The new WPHF Covid-19 Emergency Response window (WPHF 2020a) provides funding to grass-roots women peace-builders in Burundi, Colombia, Iraq, Jordan, Mali and the Pacific Islands (WPHF 2020b). It will also support women's organisations and grass-roots activists in 25 eligible countries facing conflict and crises (WPHF 2020c). Under the WPS agenda, Ireland is also committed to addressing gendered impacts of climate shocks and resultant conflicts over natural resources. The National Action Plan on WPS agenda recommends that a deeper understanding of the gendered impact of poverty, inequality, climate change and conflict needs to be developed. It also makes a specific recommendation to increase investment in research and programming on gender and security impacts of climate change in Pacific SIDS.

Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action (IASC n.d.). Also, to address the needs of the most crisis-affected and at-risk women and girls in humanitarian contexts, UN Women has launched a complementary gender programme (UN Women 2020d). The International Rescue

Committee, a key strategic partner of Ireland, plays a key role in tackling GBV in emergency and humanitarian crises in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and South Sudan. Continued collaboration with these actors will strengthen Ireland's lead role in promoting the WPS agenda.

## Supporting the multilateral response to Covid-19

At the global level, multilateral agencies, particularly UN bodies, have called for states to coordinate responses to address GBV, meet women's reproductive health needs, and expand social protection coverage to include the **furthest behind first**. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has highlighted the impact of Covid-19 on women and girls (UN Women 2020f). He has made a **special appeal** for peace at home and in homes around the world, and urged governments to take special measures to prevent and respond to the increased risk of violence against women and girls in the context of Covid-19.

The previous sections contain examples of how the key multilateral actors such as UNFPA, UN Women, ILO, the EU and others are positioning themselves with respect to meeting the needs of women and girls, and channelling funds through joint programmes, existing investment platforms such as GPE, or coordinating emergency response plans through initiatives such as the GHRP. While these indicate that targeting women and girls is recognised as a key priority, there is space and a need to champion the advancement of gender-transformative agendas at global policy level. Ireland should take the lead on this by creating alliances with other like-minded actors.

As a well-established and credible voice for gender equality on the international stage, Ireland should play a key role in firmly advocating that women and girls are at the heart of Covid-19 national and global responses including, for example, by ensuring an increased focus on gender equality and,

in particular, GBV in the GHRP. At the national level, these global commitments will need to be translated by Ireland to develop **tailored and specific responses that take into account context specificity, and how gender intersects with other forms of inequalities, and tackle root causes of gender inequality**.

So far, Ireland's international development response to Covid-19 has focused on supporting the multilateral system and building on existing partnerships and development and humanitarian programmes. Given the interconnectedness of the crisis, Ireland understands that a coherent and coordinated system-wide response is necessary, and that Ireland's financial contribution can best be directed to building on existing multilateral mechanisms and partnerships. A significant focus for Ireland's direct funding support has been to the GHRP. A commitment to multilateralism underpins Ireland's foreign policy. Ireland should play a key role in advocating for a resourced multilateral system as essential in facilitating effective global responses to Covid-19.



**Develop tailored and specific responses that take into account context specificity, and how gender intersects with other forms of inequalities, and tackle root causes of gender inequality.**

# Recommendations: Tailored and considered set of actions

This final section presents key recommendations that Ireland should take into consideration in planning emergency response and future interventions. These recommendations promote a transformative approach to gender equality and cut across the five policy priority commitment areas. They are not, however, a blueprint. The actions and responses that are prioritised at the national level will depend on context, in particular: the needs of women and girls; Mission staff's capacity to work on gender; existing relations with the government and other partner agencies; available budget; and the strength of countries' service delivery and governance systems.

The recommendations presented here are divided into two categories: the immediate and short-term response, and the medium- and long-term response. It should be noted that this does not suggest implementation of these recommendations is a linear process. Recommendations need to be aligned so that short-term responses lay the groundwork for longer-term ones, which in turn advance gender equality in the building back better agenda.

The concept of building back better emphasises not just recovering back to the status quo, but linking recovery to building resilient systems, inclusive economies and equitable societies, so that the needs of the furthest behind are met, and underlying causes of vulnerability and marginalisation are addressed. In terms of gender equality, building back better means: (a) providing gender-specific support for reconstruction and recovery, so that the differing needs of the most vulnerable categories of women and girls are met; (b) using recovery as an opportunity to address biased social norms, change discriminatory laws and policies, and create gender-equitable societies; and

(c) creating care-sensitive economies and gender-inclusive governance systems (UN Women 2020f).<sup>2</sup>

The short-, medium- and long-term recommendations are clustered below under four broad themes:

1. Actions that address the gendered specific impacts on women and girls.
2. Actions that support local responses, women's voice and agency, and WROs.
3. Actions that support coordination among stakeholders across sectors and advocate for gender-transformative approaches in global and national responses.
4. Actions that strengthen internal and partners' capacity to advance gender equality as part of Ireland's response.

## Recommendations for organising the immediate and short-term response

Specific actions and targeted interventions are required in the short term to address the particular gendered vulnerabilities within the Covid-19 response, especially for those furthest behind. While the short-term responses suggested below aim to address the immediate needs of women and girls,



**Specific actions and targeted interventions are required in the short term to address the particular gendered vulnerabilities within the Covid-19 response, especially for those furthest behind.**

<sup>2</sup> Adapted by the authors based on GFDRR (n.d.).

transformative approaches that challenge existing gender stereotypes and social norms can be incorporated within these responses. The actions that can be prioritised in the immediate and short term are listed below.

### **Actions that address the gendered specific impacts on women and girls**

Ireland should identify investment priorities for reducing gender-specific vulnerabilities through continued support for and adaptation of existing programmes and new interventions, with a focus on reaching those furthest behind. Investment decisions should build on Ireland's existing capacity and programmes, partnerships and comparative advantage, and include interventions directly targeting gender equality (gender principal) and ensure that gender objectives are integrated across sectoral programmes (gender significant). In making investment decisions on scaling up current interventions and rolling out future ones there is a need to prioritise responses across four broad areas.

- First, reducing the economic impact of Covid-19 on women and girls by supporting the provision and expansion of interventions that give targeted relief; for example, through social protection and ensuring access to health care and basic services for women and girls belonging to the most disadvantaged groups. These groups or categories include, among others: female-headed households, adolescent girls, elderly women, refugee women, women in informal sector work/migrant women in precarious employment, and women and girls with disabilities.
- Second, investments need to be made to respond to the specific risks of GBV in the context of Covid-19. Support for programmes to ensure the continuity and provision of services to survivors of violence and programmes that target prevention of GBV (including harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and early marriage) should be prioritised.

- Third, investment decisions should focus on the need to ensure the continued provision of essential services for women and girls, in particular for SRHR services and education for adolescent girls. Ringfencing funds for maternal health care, reproductive health, gender-responsive education system strengthening (including fee waivers) and school meal programmes is critical.
- Fourth, Ireland should invest in reducing the digital divide. Access to digital technologies and the bandwidth they require vary widely. Mobile technology has been used to provide access to education and health care, and even to address GBV (see above). Ireland may prioritise investing in different media including radio and TV for outreach, to reduce the digital divide and ensure that the most disadvantaged groups have access.

In terms of financing for gender equality, Ireland's international development cooperation programme consistently ranks among the highest for Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries in terms of the proportion of official development assistance (ODA) expenditure that targets gender equality (OECD 2020). Most recent figures report that in 2018 €283m was targeted at gender equality, over 77 per cent of Ireland's bilateral allocable aid (OECD 2019); 7 per cent directly targeted gender equality as a principal (gender principal) and 70 per cent included gender equality as a significant objective (gender significant) (OECD 2020). The allocation of resources in supporting short- and longer-term responses to Covid-19 should at a minimum maintain existing levels of gender equality-focused ODA, and consider setting specific targets for increasing allocations to gender-principal and gender-significant funding.



## Support efforts to ensure that global- and national-level Covid-19 response plans are grounded in strong gender analysis and take into account gendered roles, responsibilities and an intersectional approach.

### Actions that support local responses, women's voice and agency, and WROs

Ireland should support efforts to ensure that gender equality is at the centre of global- and national-level Covid-19 response plans. As a recognised partner with a strong voice in promoting gender equality, Ireland should support efforts to ensure that global- and national-level Covid-19 response plans are grounded in strong gender analysis and take into account gendered roles, responsibilities and an intersectional approach.

- At the global level, a significant focus for Ireland's direct funding of the Covid-19 response has been the GHRP. There is an opportunity to engage with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in ensuring that gender equality and, in particular, GBV are appropriately addressed within the global response plan. Ireland should also work with UN, international financial institution and NGO partners to ensure that Covid-19 responses include a gender risk analysis and respond to gender-specific vulnerabilities; and strengthen coordination between partners at both global and national levels.
- At the national level, Ireland's Missions can engage with the UN and government partners to ensure that gender equality is integrated within national-level response plans, and support entry points for strengthening capacity in addressing gender equality. Missions should prioritise

investment in training specific groups of professionals and frontline workers, health-care workers, social workers and so forth, so they can detect gender-specific risks and needs of women and girls.

Ireland should prioritise investing in community-level responses and inclusion of women's voice. Women's organisations, groups and movements are essential in ensuring that women's and girls' voice is heard and in understanding the impact of the epidemic and meeting the needs of affected populations. Women's organisations are key resources in leveraging expertise and experience in community engagement and social mobilisation, to raise awareness and protect and support young people, women, families and communities as part of the Covid-19 response. Ireland should prioritise working with these groups with flexible and adaptive funding. It can also support efforts to include women's voices in local-level emergency response plans through partners at the national level.

### Actions that support coordination among stakeholders across sectors and advocate for gender-transformative approaches in global and national responses

Ireland should prioritise gender-transformative approaches as part of Covid-19 responses.

For example, Ireland leads the development partner working group on gender equality in **Sierra Leone**. Ireland is working with UN Women and has supported the government to prioritise gender equality through the development of government guidelines on the integration of gender equality as part of the national Covid-19 response (as reported by the Irish embassy in Freetown). It has also supported mobilisation of national gender expertise to provide technical support to government agencies coordinating the national response.



## While short-term responses can focus on the immediate needs of women and girls in response to Covid-19, entry points also exist for advancing gender-transformative approaches as part of immediate response efforts.

While short-term responses can focus on the immediate needs of women and girls in response to Covid-19, entry points also exist for advancing gender-transformative approaches as part of immediate response efforts. Programmes that address the root causes of gender equality and seek to challenge gender stereotypes and roles and social norms around gender should be prioritised. It is crucial to enlist the support of men and boys at the local level to roll out emergency responses that target women and girls. Gender equality programmes challenge prevalent gender norms and discriminatory cultural practices. To minimise the possibility of a backlash, it is important to sensitise men and boys, to raise awareness about the specific gender impact of Covid-19 on women and girls and enlist male champions. There are also opportunities to support processes to change laws and policies that seek to address structural drivers of gender discrimination. Ireland should also ensure that economic response and recovery plans take women's and girls' unequal care burdens into account, and that support measures are care sensitive.

### **Actions that strengthen internal and partners' capacity to advance gender equality as part of Ireland's response**

Ireland should scale up programmes based on strong gender analysis and create capacity at the Mission level. For each of the five policy priority commitment areas data

are available for tracking country-specific gender impacts of Covid-19 (see above), albeit there are gaps. These databases can be used to develop an informed picture of what kinds of intervention are required. Missions and CSO partners have varied capacity for gender analysis. UN Women, ILO and UNFPA have produced a wide range of guidance notes and toolkits on how to conduct gender risk and needs analysis. Experts and national research institutes may be good sources of contextual knowledge. These may be used as a starting point to build capacity for strong gender analysis. Investment also needs to be made to train Mission staff to conduct gender analysis.

### **Recommendations for the medium and long term**

Covid-19 has disproportionately affected women and girls and drawn attention to the gender biases within economic, social, health and legal systems. Covid-19 has highlighted the links between the market and care economies, and the unequal care burden experienced by women and girls. The pandemic has also highlighted that the continuation of health care, education at home and wellbeing of families rely on the agency exercised by women and girls. There are opportunities to drive gender-transformative change for equality by

At the Mission level, opportunities exist to support the generation of evidence on the specific gendered impacts of Covid-19 that can inform programme response. In **Tanzania**, Ireland is supporting the adaptation of a national survey on discrimination against women in social institutions to include a specific component on the impacts of Covid-19. In **South Africa**, Ireland is working with UN Women to conduct a national survey on the impacts of Covid-19 on women and girls.

ensuring that Covid-19 response and recovery plans take into account the care economy.

How states and multilateral agencies respond to Covid-19 with respect to gender equality in the medium and long term will determine whether we sustain the gains made with respect to women's empowerment, and are able to support transformation towards building gender-inclusive health, legal, governance and economic systems. This means states and donor agencies need to focus on changing gender-biased laws and policies, and address structural drivers of gender discrimination. The actions that may be prioritised in the medium and long term include the following.

### **Actions that support local responses, women's and girls' voice and agency, and WROs**

Ireland should support building partnerships and sustain funding for WROs and peace-builders to build back better. Each of the sections on priority areas emphasises the need to engage WROs in planning the recovery response and to gain insights into how gender-specific constraints operate in different countries. There is a need to partner



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with, scale up and maintain funding to sustain the work of issue-based organisations (such as informal women workers' unions), and networks (such as those addressing GBV), or women peacekeepers, to support women's voice and agency and sustain a focus on a gender-transformative approach in the long run.

### **Actions that support coordination among stakeholders across sectors and advocate for gender-transformative approaches in global and national responses**

Ireland should strategically use its position as a leader on gender equality to promote building back better. Ireland is a firmly established international development partner and a credible voice for gender equality on the international stage. Ireland should use this voice to firmly advocate that women and girls are at the heart of Covid-19 global- and national-level responses.

- At the global level, Ireland should work with like-minded donors, and multilateral and NGO partners in advancing gender equality on the global stage. This will support a build back better agenda that seeks to realise the global commitments in line with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 and for the attainment of the SDGs as a whole. For example, Ireland's election as a non-permanent member to the UN Security Council provides an opportunity to champion gender equality within the global peace and security response to Covid-19.
- At the Mission level, Ireland should support the build back better agenda for gender equality by putting women and girls at the centre of mission strategies and programmes in line with policy commitments in *A Better World*. In countries where Ireland has a key position within the donor coordination group and connections with key ministries (for example, health, education, finance and disaster management), it has the scope to promote gender equality in national policy spaces



and to coordinate its decisions with other donors on gender-specific interventions that require strengthening. As a part of the donor consultative group, Missions may consider facilitating interactions and coordination between WROs and state institutions on key priority areas with respect to gender equality.

Ireland should support a gender-transformative approach in social provisioning and economic response and recovery plans, and strengthen cross-sectoral links. At the Mission level, Ireland should prioritise investment in programmes and policy responses that take a gender-transformative approach to social protection, WEE, and reducing unequal care burdens, and which focus on meeting the needs of those furthest behind. This means prioritising investments in the following ways:

- First, Ireland should invest in social provisioning of care (such as community childcare centres and care for the elderly) and in developing functional basic infrastructure.
- Second, Ireland's investment decisions with respect to economic recovery response plans for specific countries need to consider the following with respect to WEE and gender equality: (a) whether recovery plans provide targeted credit relief, access to financial investment, inputs and extension services for women small business owners and farmers; (b) whether these provide specific opportunities for women-owned farms and businesses to access markets, and for informal sector workers to develop skill sets; and (c) whether response plans protect workers' rights, and informal sector and migrant workers, and do not reinforce gender-biased norms.
- Third, Ireland should invest in gender budgeting exercises to monitor how resources are being channelled to implement gender equality programmes, which is key for ensuring that states are held accountable.



## **We need a sustained commitment, investment and efforts by states and multilaterals to not go back to business as usual, and to take a gender-transformative approach in their work.**

- Fourth, Ireland should consider developing cross-sectoral links to strengthen its transformative approach in its investment in and partnerships on specific issues such as social protection, girls' education, SRHR and GBV prevention.

### **Actions that strengthen internal and partners' capacity to advance gender equality as part of Ireland's response**

There is a need to invest in Ireland's organisational capacity by strengthening human, financial and technical resources that support the attainment of gender equality policy commitments. This involves support for gender training, strengthening research and learning capacity – including on data analysis and tracking the gender impact of investments – and building systems for knowledge exchange between units at Headquarters and with the Mission network to learn about real-time changes.

How we respond to Covid-19 with respect to gender equality now and in the coming months will determine whether we are able to **build back better** by creating gender-responsive health, education, legal systems and care-sensitive economies, that sustain the gains made on gender equality, address the root causes of gender discrimination, and meet the needs and ensure the rights of **those furthest behind**. For this we need a sustained commitment, investment and efforts by states and multilaterals to not go back to business as usual, and to take a **gender-transformative approach** in their work.

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