

# COVID-19 Pandemic Dealt Women a Painful Blow

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*On January 28, Women Deliver and Focus 2030 released the first-of-its-kind multi-country public opinion survey, carried out in 17 countries spanning six continents, which captures the attitudes and expectations for major actions to address gender equality during COVID-19. The data reveal that an overwhelming majority of respondents want their governments to do more to promote gender equality.*

The survey comes at a time when the ongoing COVID-19 crisis has deepened the imbalanced economic opportunities for men and women and shown the discrimination and abuse that women face in the workplace and at home. The results of the survey serves to make visible the urgency of gender issues and hold governments accountable to address the discrimination against women.

The new multi-country survey finds overwhelming majority of citizens want their governments to act now to accelerate progress on gender equality.

- A new survey covering 17 countries on six continents – representing half the world’s population – reveals that a majority of respondents want their governments to devote more resources and attention to supporting gender equality.
- The first survey of its kind since the outbreak of COVID-19, the new poll shows that the pandemic has taken a disproportionate toll on women compared to men, in terms of both mental health and household obligations.
- The survey offers a roadmap for actions that the public most wants to see, spotlighting where leaders’ and decision-makers’ focus and investments can have the most striking impact.

The first-of-its-kind international survey finds that the global public overwhelmingly supports gender equality, and a resounding majority is ready for their governments and business leaders to take action to bridge the gender divide.

At the same time, women and girls around the world are suffering the worst impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, which has disproportionately affected their mental and physical health, as well as their economic prospects.

The vast majority of respondents – 80% on average across the 17 surveyed countries – said gender equality is a priority to them personally, and 65% said their government should do

more to promote gender equality in their country.

The global public perception survey, released in a new report by Women Deliver and Focus 2030, includes 17 countries across six continents whose inhabitants represent half the world's population.

The results come two months before the Generation Equality Forum, a civil society - centered, global gathering for gender equality convened by UN Women and co-hosted by the governments of Mexico and France. There, leaders in government, the private sector, and civil society will have a critical opportunity to commit to bold, specific actions on gender equality issues.

The forum will galvanize political action and secure financial commitments for the period of 2021-2026 on measures to advance women's rights and opportunities around the world.

Sixty-one percent of respondents urged their governments to use this forum as an opportunity to increase funding for gender equality initiatives. "2021 promises to be a milestone year for accelerating global progress on gender equality.

The Generation Equality Forum will call on governments, corporation, civil society and people of all ages and backgrounds around the world to step up with bold commitments to make gender equality a reality," said Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women.

"At such a critical moment it is invigorating to see that global public opinion is not only behind us, but pushing us to do more. The world is affirming that gender equality cannot wait. We can and we must achieve it in our generation, and it must be intersectional and intergenerational."

Despite 25 years of progress since the landmark World Conference on Women in Beijing, no country has fully met its commitments to gender equality. More than half of the world's girls and women - as many as 2.1 billion people - live in countries that are not on track to reach key gender equality-related targets by 2030.

"We've made a lot of progress on gender equality over the last 25 years, but there's so much work left to do. Now, with COVID-19, just as women are assuming an outsized role in responding to the pandemic in their communities and at home, they are also experiencing enormous added burden, and we could see the consequences of that strain playing out for years to come," said Divya Mathew, Senior Manager, Policy and Advocacy at Women Deliver.

"This survey shows us where the world has fallen short, but it also delivers the encouraging news that the vast majority of women and men around the world expect their leaders to take action to advance gender equality."

Fielded in July and August of 2020, the survey offers a comprehensive picture of public experience and perception across six major gender equality issues, in addition to insights on how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected respondents' lives, livelihoods, and emotional health.

It also asked participants about their personal experiences with gender discrimination, their attitudes about sexist practices, and their beliefs about the causes of gender discrimination.

Key findings on these questions include:

- The global public supports the need for women to play a role in all aspects of the pandemic response, with 82% of survey respondents on average saying they believe women should be involved in the response at all levels. However, facts bear witness to another situation: although women make up 70% of frontline workers, they currently make up only 24% of COVID-19 response committees. To address these realities, a gender lens must be applied to COVID-19 response and recovery plans.
- COVID-19 has had a significant impact on women (ages 18-44), who are more likely to report both increased household burdens and greater emotional stress. In 13 of the 17 countries surveyed, women report experiencing more emotional stress and mental health challenges compared to men during the pandemic.
- Young people, especially young women, have the highest expectations of their governments to advance gender equality. Three in four young women (aged 18 to 24), across all 17 countries, call on their government to increase funding for equality in their country on the occasion of the Gender Equality Forum, compared to two in three respondents on average.
- 57% of women on average reported experiencing some form of gender-based discrimination in their lifetimes, with the highest rates of discrimination reported in middle-income countries like Kenya (83%), India (81%) and South Africa (72%).
- Overall, the top priority for improving gender equality is ending gender-based violence, including online harassment, sexual assault, forced and child marriage, and female genital mutilation. This was selected as first choice by 32% of respondents on average across the 17 countries.
- In the United States, self-identified Black or African American respondents are less likely to say that gender equality has improved over the last 25 years, in comparison to respondents who self-identify as white. This trend was not observed, to such a large extent, in any other country including countries with a documented history of racial discrimination, such as South Africa. The public's support for gender equality cuts across generations, political leanings, and socioeconomic groups.

While women are stronger supporters of most gender equality issues than men, a great majority of men also support gender equality. Young people under the age of 25, women in particular, are especially likely to hold their governments accountable for advancing gender equality initiatives.

The survey asked respondents for their opinions on six major gender equality issues, all of which the public resoundingly expects governments to address:

- Violence against women
- Women's economic justice and rights
- Women's movements and leadership
- Sexual and reproductive health and rights
- Women and climate change
- Technology for gender equality

Despite the widespread support for greater gender equality, persistent discriminatory attitudes towards women continue to hinder progress towards ending domestic violence and closing the gender pay gap. At the current rate of progress, it will take another century to achieve professional, political, and economic equality between women and men worldwide.

Against this backdrop, the survey offers a roadmap for actions that the public most wants to see, spotlighting where leaders' and decision-makers' focus and investments can have the most striking impact.

"The onus is on the world's decision-makers to respond to the most pressing needs of girls and women and deliver real progress toward gender equality," said Fabrice Ferrier, Director of Focus 2030. "Beyond that, women must have a seat at the tables where decisions about their lives and wellbeing are made. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, lawmakers have a duty to match their words with action on gender equality, and value the insights and leadership that women bring. Decision-makers should remember that their constituents are watching – and have very high expectations."

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*Kester Kenn Klomegah, who worked previously with Inter Press Service (IPS), is a frequent and passionate contributor to Global Research.*

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