

EXPLAINER

Helping Women Cope with the COVID-19 Crisis



In Asia, many women in the garments industry lost their jobs when businesses halted operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Photo credit: ADB.

Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on women can help policy makers design gender-sensitive measures as part of their economic recovery plan.

Published: 19 January 2021

Introduction

Significant progress has been made in women's empowerment and gender equality in the past decade. However, gender gaps persist in employment and education. Gender-based segmentation of jobs remain prevalent in Asia and the Pacific, with more women in formal employment involved in low productivity, low-paying traditional services with limited capital and skill development and little social protection and employment benefits. They are heavily concentrated in the manufacturing, education, public administration, wholesale and retail trade, and health care sectors. Many women of working age are also unable to seek employment as they bear the burden of unpaid household work.

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has exacerbated inequalities due to gender differences and social norms across regions and countries, particularly in Asia and the Pacific. It has disproportionately impacted women with wide-ranging effects on livelihood, education, gender-based violence, and unpaid care work. Given the significant gendered effects of COVID-19, governments must adopt specific actions on social and health protection, gender-responsive education, and skills training,

among others, to make women more resilient during the health crisis and the post-recovery phase.

This article takes off from a [webinar](#) organized by the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

What is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in the region?

Job loss. Employment and incomes have declined for more women than men in the second quarter of 2020 compared with the previous year. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reported that almost 510 million, or 40% of all employed women, work in sectors severely affected by the COVID-19 crisis globally. Women in manufacturing, especially in the garment industry among lower and middle-income countries, have lost jobs as export industries stopped operations. Women are also harder hit in this industry because they are in the lower-skilled, lower-paid jobs.

Increase in unpaid care work. Before the pandemic, 49.5% of women of working age declared they were either unavailable for employment or not seeking a job due to unpaid care burden, according to the ILO. Lockdowns and mobility restrictions to contain the spread of COVID-19 have forced women and girls to take on additional household work, with mothers in charge of teaching and childcare tasks.

Increased health risks. Women comprise 88% of health care workers and are on the front line in responding to the COVID-19 crisis. The lockdowns also prevented people from going to health facilities for their regular health checkup. Hampered access to health care and food created challenges for pregnant women and mothers with young children as they have special health and nutrition needs. Disruption in access to family planning services may affect about 48 million women, which could result in up to 7 million unintended pregnancies.

Surge in domestic violence and abuse. The massive unemployment caused by COVID-19 has resulted in increased alcohol and drug use and affected mental health. In Bangladesh, for example, these risk factors have led to higher emotional and physical violence, and in India, higher domestic violence and cybercrime complaints. The current situation further exposes girls to increased domestic violence and in some cases, sexual abuse. Unplanned or unwanted pregnancies will again keep the girls outside school even after the pandemic and have a devastating impact on their future.

What initiatives can help women better cope with the crisis?

Various forms of assistance have been extended to women during COVID-19. These include cash transfers, food subsidies targeted to women and girls in vulnerable households, income support program, and expanded social protection measures for female-led households.

ADB has supported its developing member countries in addressing the severe health, economic, and social impact of the pandemic. As of 31 July 2020, 16 countries have availed of the [COVID-19 pandemic response option \(CPRO\)](#)

under ADB's Countercyclical Support Facility. All CPRO programs include gender targets, such as helping poor and vulnerable groups, especially women and children.

In Pakistan, for example, women received assistance through the emergency cash transfer program, which is an extension of the national social protection system. From 4.6 million households, it scaled up to targeting 16.9 million households, and more than 60% of the beneficiaries who received the emergency cash transfer were women. The program included financial literacy training and encouraged women to open their own savings account.

At the same time, a nutrition-based conditional cash transfer program for pregnant women, lactating women, and their less than 2-year-old children is on pilot implementation in Pakistan. Another conditional cash transfer program aims to encourage girls to go to school by increasing their monthly stipend.

Other forms of assistance provided by ADB to support women during the pandemic include enabling equitable access to entrepreneurship development funds, rental support or taxation moratoriums, providing resources for gender-based violence support programs, and conducting training for frontline health workers who treat COVID-19 patients.

What needs to be done to make women more resilient to future crises?

Gender-responsive policies and sector-specific strategies can improve women's resilience in times of crisis. [Sex disaggregated data](#) can provide a better understanding of how crises affect women, and in turn, ensure that post-COVID recovery action covers gender-based concerns. The following policies are recommended:

- Enhance social services and then health protection, including access to maternity and paternity protection measures. Social protection needs to be expanded for informal workers, as women are highly concentrated in the informal sector.
- Create a gender-responsive educational system that fosters a gender-neutral learning environment.
- Narrow gender gaps through job creation and skills development, especially in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), and digital technology. Education and reskilling support for women can prepare them for work post-COVID-19. Better digital skills can boost their career potential and improve their income.
- Apply relevant labor standards and remove discrimination in all jobs and sectors. Women need access to employment opportunities and the kind of work they want to engage in.
- Address all forms of gender-based violence.
- Promote women's representation and leadership alongside men on all levels. Increased women's participation in the policy- and decision-making process could provide better solutions to address gender-related issues.
- Address unpaid care burdens. Public or subsidized childcare services should be significantly

improved in many countries in Asia and the Pacific to enable women to participate in the labor force.

Resources

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Cyn-Young Park is director of the Regional Cooperation and Integration Division of the Economic Research and Regional Cooperation Department. During her progressive career within ADB, she has been a main author and contributor to the Asian Development Outlook, and participated in various global and regional forums including the G20 Development Working Group, as well as written and lectured extensively about the Asian economy and financial markets. She managed a team of economists to assess the socioeconomic benefits of ADB programs and projects and provide country diagnostic studies for effective ADB support to its developing member countries. Prior to joining ADB, she was an OECD economist.

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