

Parliamentary Web Dialogue «Gendered Impacts of COVID-19»

Monday, 15 June 2020

HIGHLIGHTS¹

SUMMARY

On 15 June the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly held its sixth parliamentary web dialogue on the topic: “Gendered Impacts of COVID-19” in an effort to promote inter-parliamentary dialogue on relevant security developments pertaining to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Opening the event, **OSCE PA Special Representative on Gender Issues, Dr. Hedy Fry (Canada)**, highlighted the exacerbation of gender-related vulnerabilities as a result of the pandemic, and called for upscaling efforts in advancing the gender agenda. Fry stressed the multilevel effect of the pandemic on women’s well-being, calling for strengthening crisis response infrastructure and the need for sex disaggregated data. The **OSCE PA President George Tsereteli (Georgia)** highlighted key issues related to women’s safety, especially observations of increased Gender-based violence incidents during the pandemic and emphasized on the need for strengthening women’s participation in policy making and leadership positions. The **OSCE PA Secretary General, Roberto Montella**, emphasized on the importance the OSCE PA attaches to mainstreaming gender-related policies and highlighted the Secretariat’s efforts in advancing equal representation among staff and members’ activities.

The event was based upon the recent publication of the Assembly’s [2020 Gender Balance Report²](#), which provided a detailed and comprehensive description of the current and long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on Gender Equality, including on issues of Gender-based violence (GBV), economic security, access to health care services, the gender wage gap, women’s unpaid care work, as well as issues related to the women, peace and security agenda and women’s political leadership. Chaired by the OSCE PA Special Representative on Gender Issues, Dr. Hedy Fry, the web dialogue aimed at exploring the disproportionate impact on women’s well-being and analyzing the gender aspects of OSCE participating States’ COVID-19-related response measures aiming at mitigating its effects on women and girls. Invited experts and members of the Parliamentary Assembly, exchanged views on gender-sensitive policymaking as well as on the application of good practices identified during the health crisis inside and outside the OSCE region. The dialogue also focused in analyzing gender-related challenges faced by LGBTI+ and refugee communities and put forward concrete recommendations on

¹**DISCLAIMER:** The Highlights from the OSCE PA Web Dialogue are not intended to be official conclusions, nor an exhaustive list of all issues raised during the debate, but rather a collection of main points pulled together by the International Secretariat for possible future reference. As such, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly makes no claims nor warranties of any kind, expressed or implied, about their completeness and reliability.

²<https://www.oscepa.org/documents/special-representatives/gender-issues/report-17/4055-2020-report-by-the-special-representative-on-gender-issues-the-gendered-impacts-of-covid-19/file>

enhancing gender equality, women's participation in decision-making and advancing gender mainstreaming of public policies.

Participants included parliamentarians and staff from Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Ireland, Italy, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Luxembourg, Moldova, The Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Russian Federation, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Several OSCE officials and experts also attended and contributed to the event.



INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron, Inter-Parliamentary Union President, Guest of Honor

- Emphasized on the disproportionate effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on women working in essential services, the health sector, as well in providing unpaid care services for their family entourage, facing increased exposure to physical and mental health risks.
- Highlighted the aggravation of pre-existing socioeconomic discrimination towards women, especially regarding women's access to social health systems, and underlined their exposure to shadow economy.
- Criticized women's underrepresentation in Parliaments while emphasizing that gender-sensitive legislatures ensure inclusive policies, much needed in coordinating effective State responses.
- Underlined the importance of gender-responsive budgeting and lawmaking as essential in the design of policies.
- Urged for more gender-relevant social security schemes which focus in balancing inequalities, e.g. through implementing shared parental leave schemes.
- Highlighted the need for enhancing women's leadership in Parliaments as key in developing better future responses.
- Encouraged policymakers to make use of the media and other outreach platforms in order to challenge existing gender stereotypes also through the design of narratives countering sexism and discrimination against women.

EXPERTS' KEY POINTS

Ms. Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

- Underlined the disproportionate impact of self-isolation and quarantine measures inflicted on women while urging States to deepen their anticipatory efforts in order to respond to similar large-scale crises.
- Criticized the observed lack of situational preparedness by Governments in tackling the increase of domestic violence.
- Highlighted the increased exposure to health risks of women with minority backgrounds, including migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, Roma and Sinti, women with disabilities and elderly women.
- Encouraged Parliaments to be critical against decision-making systems which exclude the active participation of women.
- Underlined the leading role of Parliamentarians in addressing the impact of the crisis and invited them to promote the ratification and implementation of the CoE Istanbul Convention.
- Promoted the adoption and implementation of comprehensive gender equality action plans by all OSCE participating States.
- Encouraged OSCE pS to integrate a gender perspective in their legislation and budget outlines, while focusing on emergency planning and preparedness mechanisms.
- Urged States to advance their responsiveness to counter GBV while ensuring the availability and accessibility of adequate protection and referral mechanisms.

Ms. Françoise Girard, President of the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC)

- Underlined the laxity of health systems and social safety networks in responding to the health crisis and presented concrete cases of the pandemic's fallout to services destined to women, especially to hot lines, and shelters for victims of domestic violence.
- Stressed the negative impact of COVID-19 on the availability, quality, and access of women and girls to maternal and reproductive health care while highlighting setbacks regarding access to abortion care and contraceptives.
- Highlighted the need for safeguarding and reinforcing women's sexual and reproductive rights while condemning their sideline during health crises. Empowerment policies allowing women and girls to take greater control of their health care were described as essential.
- Highlighted the importance of Human Rights activists' work on progressing the gender agenda and urged parliamentarians to advance the advocacy and adoption of gender-sensitive policies.
- Presented key recommendations as promoted by IWHC and its partner organizations, urging for:
 - adequate financing and support of child and elder care;
 - sufficient services and financial support for survivors of Gender-based violence;
 - accessibility to contraceptives and abortion pills in parallel with investment in telemedicine services;
 - equal pay and abuse-free working environments for women;
 - the reallocation of funds to community self-support services.

THE DEBATE

OSCE PA members actively engaged in the ensuing debate and exchanged a wide range of views and experiences on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender equality and gender-related issues across the region. OSCE parliamentarians and experts from the international community debated, on the intersectionality of factors contributing to observed discrimination, challenges and risks faced by women. The debate focused particularly on Gender-based violence with all speakers underlining the need for enhancing prevention measures and responses to this critical challenge.

Highlights:

- Gender challenges have multiplied as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The current health crisis should be considered as an opportunity to upscale efforts in addressing chronic issues exposed by the pandemic, including in the area of gender.
- Chronic deficiencies and challenges in health care systems, exposed by the pandemic, should be addressed through a social and gender lens ensuring equal, unhindered, and non-discriminatory access to quality health services.
- The contribution of women working on essential services and health care provision was recognized, underlining their increased exposure to health-related risks.
- Labour rights must maintain their relevance. The need to mitigate the effect of the health crisis on low-paid essential workers was particularly highlighted.
- Collection of sex-disaggregated data is necessary for the design and implementation of gender-relevant policies which consider the needs of every social, ethnic and minority group.
- Advancing gender mainstreaming efforts through education and open public dialogue constitutes an important step towards the formation of a gender aware society.
- Efforts should be multiplied to address the root causes and the long-term effects of Gender-based violence (GBV) in the framework of a well-considered gender strategies and action plans outlined and implemented by all states.
- Advancing women's representation in decision making bodies is essential for the democratic functioning of societies. Efforts should be made by all States in ensuring equal and fair representation of women in the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government.
- Justice and law-enforcement bodies must upscale efforts to track and hold GBV perpetrators accountable while reinforcing their capabilities through regular trainings for their staff on gender issues.
- States should advance the ratification of the CoE's Istanbul Convention and actively engage in dialogue with international and domestic interlocutors in order to explore effective responses to GBV.
- Gender-sensitive policymaking is key for ensuring democratic, inclusive, and holistic responses to old and new socioeconomic challenges.

- States should ensure women's sexual and reproductive rights, while providing high-standard and accessible maternal and reproductive health care services including unhindered access to contraceptives and telemedicine.
- Gender-related programmes are key for women's empowerment and public awareness and efforts should be made in cooperation with Civil Society in ensuring their availability, accessibility, and sustainability.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened the risks faced by LBGTI+ communities including an exacerbation of homophobic rhetoric and discrimination incidents. Efforts should be made by legislators in broadening the social understanding of Gender.