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# How the Coronavirus Risks Exacerbating Women's Political Exclusion

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The coronavirus pandemic continues to disrupt political processes around the world. Seventy-three elections have been [postponed](#). Many parliaments have suspended or limited their activities, and over a hundred countries have [restricted](#) citizens' freedom of assembly and expression in the name of public health. Authoritarian and authoritarian-leaning leaders have further taken advantage of the emergency to [concentrate power](#) in the executive branch.

Few analyses have probed the gendered consequences of these trends. In the media, the main [narrative](#) about gender and pandemic politics has centered on the perceived effectiveness of female politicians in responding to the crisis—including Chancellor Angela Merkel in Germany and Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand. Yet these positive headlines conceal a more worrisome global picture: the pandemic's profound political and socioeconomic effects could halt or reverse advances in women's political inclusion.

The pandemic hit at a time when feminist advocates around the world were [preparing](#) to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and making a new push to realize its progressive commitments. Although the past two and a half decades have brought significant progress in women's political participation, the overall pace of change has been slow and uneven. In many places, progress toward gender equality in public life has [stagnated](#) in recent years, threatened by illiberal and authoritarian actors seeking to roll back past gains.

Drawing on interviews with women's rights advocates, election experts, and female politicians across ten countries and five regions, this article traces four emerging risks that the pandemic poses for women's political participation—and four opportunities women politicians and advocates see arising from this moment of crisis.<sup>1</sup> We focus primarily on implications for women's electoral participation as voters and



candidates, given that elections are pivotal processes for ensuring democratic accountability and women's representation in formal political institutions. This analysis is preliminary; further hurdles and openings may surface as the crisis unfolds and better data become available.

Governments and assistance providers need to act swiftly to ensure that the pandemic does not spur a hardening of exclusionary political structures. Only political processes that are reflective of citizens' diverse experiences—and accountable to the most marginalized social groups—will produce pandemic responses that mitigate rather than deepen social and gender inequalities.

## FOUR EMERGING RISKS TO WOMEN'S ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

Across regions, women's rights advocates and female political leaders highlight four emerging risks to women's political inclusion as the pandemic continues.

### Increasing Economic Precarity and a Return to Traditional Gender Roles

First, the crisis is decreasing women's economic security and increasing their unpaid domestic and care work. Women around the world are disproportionately employed in the **informal economy** and in jobs with fewer social protections. As a result, they have been severely affected by public health orders that have curtailed consumption and restricted mobility. In South Africa, for example, women made up two-thirds of the 3 million people who **lost** their jobs. A survey in Kenya indicated that more than half of **working women in Kenya** lost their jobs in the spring.

In addition, many women have taken on additional caregiving tasks, primarily due to disruptions in schooling and childcare. Women were already doing three times as much unpaid domestic work as men prior to the pandemic; this burden has **increased** as traditional social norms in most societies still frame caregiving as primarily women's responsibility. In the **United States**, for example, women's participation in the labor force is currently falling faster than men's, and more than one in four women are considering slowing down their careers or leaving their jobs. A recent UN survey conducted in South and Southeast Asia found that **women during the pandemic** are more likely than men to perform the triple tasks of childcare, adult care, and domestic work, which leaves them less time for other tasks.

These two trends are worsening existing gender inequities in financial power and time availability that often prevent women from engaging in politics. Political campaigns tend to be costly endeavors: candidates often have to pay a substantial fee to even be included on parties' electoral lists. Most political parties also fail to provide support for caregiving, with meetings often held late at night. The pandemic is reinforcing these barriers to entry. Although some women may also be more motivated to run to tackle the inequities uncovered by the pandemic, advocates worry that women from less privileged backgrounds risk getting left behind. "[The pandemic is] much harder for women because of the inflexibility in the labor market and gender roles," notes Réka Sáfrány of the Hungarian Women's Lobby. "It's seen as inevitable that women make all of these sacrifices; it's the natural way things are, and women should be celebrated for it. It's not actually about consulting mothers on how online teaching should be improved or how the care burden could be lowered."<sup>22</sup>

## Greater Reliance on Informal Practices That Reinforce Male Political Dominance

Second, current disruptions in formal political processes may precipitate a shift to more informal political practices, which are often less accessible to women aspirants and other political outsiders who lack the necessary connections. Crises enable informal rules and institutions to flourish—and these tend to favor the already dominant group. Within political parties, for example, disruptions in party primaries may lead male gatekeepers to select candidates who look like themselves or who are part of their male-dominated social networks, rather than abiding by formal selection rules.

This pattern may play out in overt or subtle ways. For example, a survey of party members eligible for this month's Brazilian municipal election found that the pandemic to date has not necessarily discouraged women from running. However, it also suggested female candidates are more likely than male candidates to believe that the pandemic will decrease their access to financial resources and support from local party brokers, and women are stepping up their community engagement to make up for these anticipated losses. Already during the last Brazilian election, some female candidates reported being forced to sign false receipts or return allocated campaign funds against their will. This type of discrimination and intimidation may be even more difficult to monitor in the current context. In Mexico, where a gender parity law requires parties to run equal numbers of male and female candidates, women's rights advocates fear that male politicians may take advantage of the fact that female politicians are too busy with childcare and other tasks to run for office to register their wives, girlfriends, or female relatives as candidates—with the aim of wielding power behind the scenes.<sup>3</sup>

## Inequities in Access to Online Platforms

Third, the switch to online campaigning and voter engagement creates new challenges for female voters and candidates. Globally, women on average have less access to and familiarity with online platforms and social media tools. In places with weaker internet penetration, non-elite women in particular may struggle to receive information about political processes that is disseminated online. For candidates, the shift from in-person meetings to remote campaigning benefits those with more established profiles and networks. For example, obtaining airtime on television or radio in many countries requires contacts and resources, which may not be available to female political newcomers.<sup>4</sup> As one Ugandan activist observes, “Most of the radio and television stations here are owned by politicians. If [you] are competing with a man who is the owner of a radio station in your region, what are your chances of getting airtime? How are you going to reach the masses?”<sup>5</sup> While some local civil society organizations are offering training for female candidates focused on social media use and digital campaigning, not all women have the ability to participate in virtual workshops.<sup>6</sup> Further, this type of training is not currently integrated into larger, donor-funded initiatives supporting women in politics.

Greater reliance on online campaigning and voter engagement is also likely to increase women's vulnerability to online harassment. Since the beginning of the pandemic, women's rights organizations have reported a staggering increase in gender-based violence. Emerging evidence suggests a correlated uptick in online abuse, as part of a continuum of gender-based violence that extends from the private to the public sphere. This is not a new trend, particularly in polarized political environments. In Lebanon and Brazil, for example, online abuse targeting feminist activists was already an increasing problem prior to the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> However,



women's retreat from public life, common in crises and reinforced by lockdown measures, alongside **escalating** breaches in privacy and cyber stalking, indicates a troubling pattern. As Lebanese activist and former municipal councilor Vicky El-Khoury Zwein notes, "Feminist activists are facing a lot of harassment and threats: they are called foreign agents, spies, that they are destroying families." She adds, "It's become more because now in the pandemic, everyone is online. They have time to follow what we are doing. They have time for harassment. . . . It requires more and more courage [to engage in politics online]."<sup>8</sup>

### Decreased Public Visibility of Women

A final challenge is that in some contexts, the pandemic has made women less publicly visible and pushed debates over women's rights off the political agenda. As politicians around the world have shifted to crisis management mode, senior male politicians tend to dominate political debates, press briefings, and media discussions—despite the fact that women are often the ones spearheading community responses. For example, globally, 85.2 percent of **national-level COVID-19 task forces** include mostly men, and 81.2 percent are headed by male leaders. In the UK, 42.5 percent of the government's daily press briefings during the pandemic have featured an **all-male lineup** with no female politician or expert. The same pattern is evident in Poland. "It's a male issue," says Polish parliamentarian Wanda Nowicka. "The prime minister, the minister of health, most experts are all men. You see, you hear, you reflect on what men are talking about."<sup>9</sup>

This imbalance partly reflects the fact that men (especially men from dominant social groups) remain overrepresented in political leadership posts: appointments to COVID-19-related bodies simply replicated this pattern. This skewed view of who counts as an expert risks weakening policy attention to gender

and other identity-based vulnerabilities in pandemic responses and **pushing** urgent gender equality priorities off the political agenda. It also reinforces gender stereotypes that associate men with political power and incorrectly relegate women to supporting roles or the domestic sphere. In the medium term, the lack of visible women leaders may further discourage women from engaging in politics, as institutions continue to send the message that women do not belong in politics.

### NOT ALL WOMEN ARE EQUALLY VULNERABLE

In addition to these overarching patterns, politically or economically marginalized women as well as women in authoritarian or conflict-affected countries face specific vulnerabilities.

For one, the pandemic is exacerbating not only inequities between women and men, but also between different groups of women. In Brazil, for example, female candidates who are funded by well-established networks—including churches—are less likely to be affected by the shift to online campaigning than those closely tied to localized, grassroots movements. "It depends not only on their economic resources, but whether or how their networks will be available," argues Brazilian political scientist Flávia Biroli. "On the left, some candidates in the past were strongly connected to neighborhood movements. They were campaigning based on close contact. Now, they can still mobilize on the internet, but when they depend on geographically established communities, it might be hard for them to access those people, especially if they don't have the resources."<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, women—and feminist actors in particular—face distinct challenges in politically repressive contexts. As above, many authoritarian or semi-authoritarian

regimes have used the pandemic to further restrict civic and political space, thereby closing off the primary channel available to women for autonomous political mobilization. These challenges are compounded in contexts in which authoritarian or populist leaders have embraced anti-gender equality platforms. In both Hungary and Poland, for example, governments have taken advantage of the pandemic to push forward new anti-gender equality measures, such as tighter abortion restrictions and a weakening of domestic violence protections, while at the same time curtailing women's right to protest these policy shifts. Feminist activists note that the same governments have been much more tolerant of protests by pro-government actors.<sup>11</sup>

Risks to women's political participation are also heightened in insecure settings. Existing data shows that violence against civilians has increased since the start of the pandemic. In many already violent places, nonstate armed groups have taken advantage of disruptions in state activity to step up their activities and expand territorial control. Violence by state security actors has intensified, particularly in marginalized communities. These trends have gendered implications. Women's rights activists caution that heightened insecurity may discourage women from engaging politically due to increased risks of gender-based violence and disruptions in existing protection mechanisms. Given the global rise in domestic violence during the pandemic, many women also face additional coercion within the home, which may prevent them from engaging in political processes on their own terms.

## OPPORTUNITIES TO REINFORCE WOMEN'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Despite these worrisome trends, the current crisis also holds opportunities for reinforcing women's political participation.

First, women's rights activists note that they are witnessing the emergence of **stronger feminist solidarity networks**. From Hungary to Brazil, women are more vocal online than in the past, and activists are finding wider audiences for feminist critiques of current pandemic responses. Some of these networks activate relationships built during past moments of crisis, such as the previous mass protests against abortion restrictions in Poland. But advocates are also forging new connections. In Mexico, for example, the crisis has made it easier for women's rights groups to connect with female politicians to share resources and calls for action. "We are working more closely with each other, and synergies are stronger," says gender consultant and former magistrate of the Electoral Court of Mexico Carmen Alanis. "That's one good thing to come out of this: more exchanges of information."<sup>12</sup> Of course, increased online collaboration is not necessarily inclusive of all women: in Mexico, indigenous and other marginalized women are less able to take advantage of these virtual networks.

Second, as noted above, there is some evidence from Western democracies that **more women may be motivated to run for office** to address the unfolding economic and social crisis. In the United States, for example, **Black women in 2020 ran for political office** at higher rates than ever before, motivated both by the COVID-19 crisis—which has disproportionately affected people of color—as well as the national reckoning over racial justice. In Australia, the nonpartisan group **Women for Election Australia** has also noted an uptick in women running or expressing an interest in running. It remains to be seen whether this trend extends beyond these established democracies and how a potential increase in political ambition among certain women interacts with heightened financial and caregiving constraints. Beyond running for office, the move to online political engagement may open up new opportunities for low-cost and



unfiltered political engagement by women and other marginalized groups—if shortcomings in current mechanisms to prevent threatening online behavior are adequately addressed.

Third, female candidates may be able to **capitalize on women’s crucial roles** as first responders during the pandemic. Many women have acted as caregivers and providers of emergency services during the COVID-19 crisis and are thus well-positioned to speak directly to the pandemic’s local impact. In Lebanon, for example, “people were able to see that they can rely on women during the crisis,” notes one municipal councilor. “I would say that in civil society and in communities, there is an increase in trust in women. [Citizens] are reaching out to women in the municipal councils to ask for support, because they feel that they will respond in a better way, and they say how efficient they are.”<sup>13</sup>

Existing research underscores that exceptional crisis environments can generate greater support for female political representation: they increase the demand for qualities often associated with women, such as empathy and care, and focus voters’ attention on issues that women are often perceived to be competent at addressing—such as education and health. For example, one [study](#) found that in Brazilian municipalities more affected by the Zika virus, voters were more likely to vote for female mayoral candidates. Even as the COVID-19 pandemic precipitates a return to traditional gender roles, it may also [open up opportunities](#) for stereotypically feminine traits to be more highly valued in political leaders.

Of course, there is a risk inherent in this narrative: it can reinforce the pressure on women leaders to deliver more than men, which means they may also be punished more harshly. Women leaders famously suffer from a [glass cliff](#): they are promoted in positions of acute crisis, which easily set them up to fail. Moreover, there is a risk that as the economic crisis persists, female politicians may be disadvantaged by the stereotype that men are better managers of the economy. Existing research shows that in [Latin America](#), parties run fewer women

candidates when voters are unhappy with economic outcomes. Similarly, financial crises tend to reduce [women’s presence in parliaments](#).

Lastly, and perhaps most optimistically, the pandemic represents an opportunity to **reimagine existing governance paradigms**, as well as the gender norms that underpin them. Crises can spur new behaviors, and periods of rebuilding may open up opportunities to push for policies that can shift inequitable gender norms and thus give rise to more resilient governance systems. For example, as the COVID-19 pandemic leads public institutions as well as private employers to rethink the way we work, advocates may be able to push for [policies and practices](#) that enable women and men to better share caring responsibilities, including more options for remote work, greater support for childcare and parental leave, and greater economic recognition of paid and unpaid care provision. Such shifts urgently need to [extend to parliaments](#), state bureaucracies, and political parties, which often lag behind the private sector instead of leading the way.

## SAFEGUARDING WOMEN’S POLITICAL INCLUSION

In order to address these risks and reinforce women’s political participation during and after the pandemic, governments, civil society organizations, and aid providers cannot proceed with business as usual. Instead, they need to systematically revise their election guidance and assistance using a gender lens and renew their push for gender-inclusive institutional reforms. Much can and should also be learned from gender equality activists who are working to support female voters and candidates at the local level, whose efforts need ongoing domestic and international support.

***Invest in data collection.*** To systematically address emerging challenges, we need a better picture of how the pandemic is reshaping women’s political participation. Citizen-led election observation groups are well placed

to collect such data. Observation training materials and checklists should include targeted questions on women's ability to vote and run for office—including how increased financial precarity, caregiving responsibilities, and disruptions in formal political processes differently impact women and men (as well as relevant subgroups of women). International election observation missions that proceed during the pandemic should also evaluate the pandemic's gendered implications in consultation with local women's rights groups. In addition, any observation effort should prioritize monitoring traditional and social media channels for defamation and hate speech targeting politically active women.

Election monitoring bodies (EMBs), on the other hand, are critical for collecting gender-disaggregated data on voter registration and turnout. They should also ensure that accurate information about voting processes continues to reach both women and men—as [outlined](#) in greater detail by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. This will require collaborating with civil society groups and government actors to help close the digital gender divide in order to ensure that women can participate on an equal basis. Assistance providers that work directly with EMBs can press for more gender-disaggregated data collection and analysis, as well as for the systematic enforcement of existing gender quota rules even in a pandemic context.

***Support female candidates.*** As noted above, many women politicians are well positioned to speak to the pandemic's impact on local communities.<sup>14</sup> To leverage this opening, assistance must address the new barriers women candidates face in many countries. Traditional modalities of support, such as training workshops, need to be adapted to account for social distancing—for example by combining remote support with smaller in-person meetings or working more extensively with grassroots groups. Now more than ever, such efforts need to be initiated early enough to allow for local input and adaptation. Moreover, when appropriate, candidate training needs to include a stronger focus on building digital skills in order to help women candidates make

greater use of online platforms and protect themselves from cyber abuse and harassment.

Given the impact of the crisis on many women's financial power, new strategies also need to be instituted to recruit women to run for office and provide financial and logistical support for those who do. Political parties or EMBs can make dedicated funding available to female candidates—whether in the form of pooled campaign funds or earmarked party financing. Donors and local civil society actors can push for campaign finance rules and monitor their enforcement; those that work directly with political parties should also increase pressure on party leaders to abide by candidate selection rules, ensure gender balance on pandemic-related committees, and recruit qualified female candidates.

***Address women's security needs.*** Given the documented increase in gender-based violence during the pandemic and heightened risks of overall insecurity, additional measures are needed to ensure the [security of female political leaders](#) and advocates both offline and online. Such efforts should begin by analyzing dynamics within the home: we need to better understand, document, and address the implications of domestic violence on women's equal political participation as an electoral integrity issue. This may require observation efforts to reach out to hotlines or other data collection mechanisms for understanding violence in the private sphere. Social media platforms need to be pushed to better monitor and [regulate online harassment](#) against politically active women—including through government regulations that force companies to be more transparent about their content moderation practices, to invest in more culturally informed moderation, and to remove abusive content more swiftly.

***Push for gender-sensitive electoral reform.*** The current moment offers unique opportunities both to highlight the relationship between gendered roles in society and women's political participation and leverage this linkage to promote electoral reforms that address issues historically viewed as nonpolitical—such as subsidized

childcare for candidates and politicians or new laws sanctioning gendered disinformation and harassment on social media networks. In addition, the pandemic underscores that gender parity in media coverage is an important electoral integrity issue. Electoral rules need to ensure that publicly funded media outlets give female and male candidates equal time and present female aspirants in a fair and unbiased manner. “We need to see more female figures on TV. . . . With the pandemic, women can’t go door to door. TV will be even more important. So we have to support women to be in the media, which right now is very expensive and difficult,” emphasizes Zwein. “And again, [we need to change] the language that media outlets use: it’s not just about asking a female candidate about her kids: it’s about her opinion and political views.”<sup>15</sup>

***Invest in feminist networks.*** Once women are elected, external support should prioritize supporting stronger networks and dialogue between feminist actors in government and those mobilizing for gender equality within civil society. Having women in decisionmaking bodies alone is not sufficient to ensure gender-sensitive policies: female and male politicians need to be informed by and accountable to gender and social justice movements. Such networks will be essential in ensuring the adoption and implementation of progressive policies that can help mitigate the intergenerational impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender equality.

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## NOTES

- 1 Interviews took place with advocates, experts, and politicians from Brazil, Burkina Faso, Hungary, Kenya, Lebanon, Mexico, Morocco, Nepal, Poland, and Uganda.
- 2 Authors’ interview with Hungarian Women’s Lobby Chair Réka Sáfrány, video call, August 13, 2020.
- 3 Authors’ interview with Carmen Alanis, gender consultant and former magistrate of the Electoral Court of Mexico, video call, September 23, 2020.
- 4 Authors’ interview with Lebanese activist and former municipal councilor Vicky El-Khoury Zwein, video call, August 5, 2020.
- 5 Authors’ interview with Ugandan activist Margaret Birungi, video call, September 11, 2020.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Authors’ interview with Brazilian political scientist Flávia Biroli, video call, August 31, 2020.
- 8 Authors’ interview with Zwein.
- 9 Authors’ interview with Polish parliamentarian Wanda Nowicka, video call, August 18, 2020.
- 10 Authors’ interview with Biroli.
- 11 Authors’ interview with Nowicka.
- 12 Authors’ interview with Alanis.
- 13 Authors’ interview with Lebanese municipal councilor, video call, August 4, 2020.
- 14 Authors’ interview with Biroli.
- 15 Authors’ interview with Zwein.

