

Egypt's Measures to Support Women in the COVID-19 Pandemic Fight

By Gender and Legal Expert House in
partnership with the Egyptian Centre for
Women's Rights

Introduction

As the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis intensifies and the Egyptian government is currently analyzing and assessing policies, Gender and Legal Expert House (GELEH), in collaboration with the Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights (ECWR), is particularly concerned with gender equality and the inclusion of gender mainstreaming at heart of Egypt's COVID-19 response.

For these reasons, GELEH and ECWR share gender mainstreaming policies to monitor the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on women.

Incorporating a gender-sensitive perspective is particularly important as it ensures that policy-making and legislative work has a greater relevance for society, making policies respond more effectively to all needs of citizens equally – both women and men.

Emerging Gender Impacts:

Health care workers:

According to CAPMAS statistics¹, women make up around 42.4% of human doctors and 91.1% nursing staff working for the Ministry of Health, while there are 73.1% female nursing staff in hospitals and therapeutic facilities in the private sector. As such, women in the health sector are on the front line of being exposed to the virus.

Interrupted access to maternal care and other family planning health services:

For pregnant women, it is also becoming increasingly difficult to access safe maternal care at the moment, or even emotional support.

It is evident that in past epidemics, including Ebola and Zika², efforts to contain outbreaks often affected routine health services including pre- and post-natal health care and contraceptives, which impacts women's access to sexual and reproductive health services, particularly for family planning.

Greater burdens of unpaid housework on women and girls:

¹ CAPMAS, 2018

² UNGA A/70/723. Protecting Humanity from Future Health Crises: Report of the High Level Panel on the Global Response to Health Crises.

Women and girls usually bear responsibility for caring for ill family members and the elderly at home, and the closure of schools further has increased the burden of unpaid housework on women and girls.

Women's economic empowerment

In Egypt, women are breadwinners for over 3.3 million families in Egypt, representing 14% of the total number of families.³ Women deprived from their financial support are exposed to increased risk exploitation or abuse and imposes huge stress on families.

It is important to note that many women will not be rescued by social safety nets, as a large number of women work in the informal sector, reaching around 71%.⁴

Increasing GBV and protection risks:

Increasing food insecurity and economic burdens can lead to a rise of intimate partner violence and conflict, and as such, a rise in rates of domestic violence due to heightened tensions.

On top of that, support to GBV survivors (i.e. clinical management of rape and mental health and psycho-social support) as well as victims of female genital mutilation (FGM) may be disrupted as health service providers and the police are overburdened and preoccupied with handling COVID-19 cases.

Education and digital illiteracy

Evidence from other outbreaks suggests that education status impacted knowledge and awareness uptake for certain groups, which largely includes women, as women constitute around 64 percent of the total number of Egyptians above the age 9 who cannot read or write.⁵

School closures also meant that many young girls living in unfortunate situations are deprived of education opportunities due to lack of digital literacy and access to the internet.

Recommendations

Disaggregate data and targeted assistance:

³ CAPMAS, 2018

⁴ <http://businessforwardauc.com/2019/09/08/lifting-1-billion-out-of-poverty-how-71-of-egypts-women-work-in-the-informal-sector/>

⁵ CAPMAS, 2017

In the midst of this crisis, it is very important to ensure **targeted assistance** to protect the incomes and the businesses of vulnerable groups that include women.

Targeted assistance means that sectors or businesses with a larger female workforce that will be affected by this crisis should be taken into consideration, such as domestic workers, childcare workers, healthcare workers, and female workers in tourism.

Data related to implementation of the emergency response must be disaggregated by sex, age, and disability and analysed accordingly in order to understand the gendered differences in exposure to design differential preventive measures.

Mitigation measures to address the burden of unpaid housework

National plans should be implemented to take into account the gendered roles and responsibilities in the household and aim to reduce the inequalities that exist through provision of water and fuel, food processing, cooking and washing facilities. It can also provide more access to childcare facilities.

It is important to also introduce innovative digital community education content that highlights men's roles within the household.

Strengthen the meaningful participation of women and girls

Decision-making authorities should include more women in drafting programs and policies related to COVID-19 and in proposing short-term and long-term measures.

The inclusion of more women in decision-making positions, particularly from the health system, can contribute to better and more effective addressing of needs.

Develop targeted women's economic empowerment strategies and explore cash transfer programming

Cash transfer programmes for women and girls need to be prioritized and family aid kits for rural women can help lower the economic burden.

Place a moratorium on all forms of evictions from homes due to an inability to pay rent or loans using land/houses as collateral.

National bank and other commercial banks and microfinance institutions should cooperate closely to properly and adequately address women's financial burdens, especially on small scale borrowers and SMEs through waiving banking charges and loan repayments.

To ensure a shift towards formal labor force, policies should be aimed towards providing more training opportunities from home and to allow them to formally register their businesses or work.

Provide incentives for private employers by reducing taxes or providing extra benefits to champion family-friendly policies to protect female employees, reduce stress, and support improved child and family well-being.

Provide pathways to deal with Gender-Based Violence

Primary and secondary healthcare facilities may be requested to take on the cases of GBV survivors and refer to services, NGOs, or tertiary hospitals when higher level of care is needed.

More funding is also needed to cover any extra costs for civil society organizations, shelters and day care centres that serve persons suffering from gender-based violence.

Prioritize access to sexual and reproductive health services

Hospitals should be taking precautions to ensure that pregnant women have access to services and are not exposed to ill patients or visitors.

Ensure women have more access to information and digital networks

Women have typically less access to information than men. Thus, simple informative brochures and leaflets should be provided for targeted households that lack access to sufficient information or media exposure.

Mobile phone and internet services such as Orange or Vodafone should prioritize information sharing as well as providing internet access for vulnerable communities.