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GENDER AND COVID-19

Key Considerations, Resources and Support for Infrastructure and Natural Resource Companies in Emerging Markets

The COVID-19 outbreak has created a new imperative for stakeholder capitalism¹ as the severity of the economic impact from the crisis depends on the ability of governments, citizens, and the private sector to work together in mutual support. All stakeholders have a shared interest in fighting the spread of infection. Businesses, with their existing resources and networks, have a unique leadership role to play. Given their centrality in providing essential products and services, businesses in the infrastructure and natural resource (INR) sector—for example, power, water, waste management, transport, municipality, and mining companies—are an especially pivotal part of this effort.

With overwhelming evidence demonstrating that gender-inclusive strategies are good for the bottom line, many INR companies have made progress in recruiting more women, implementing gender inclusive HR policies, supporting female-owned suppliers, combatting gender-based violence, and ensuring that community investment programs benefit both women and men. Data on COVID-19 initially indicate the likelihood of a disproportionate toll on women, particularly in emerging markets. Gender-inclusivity is a critical component of an effective company COVID-19 response plan, which should protect the most vulnerable while also retaining the business gains achieved from closing gender gaps.

This note is designed as a quick reference guide to help companies understand how smart, gender-inclusive strategies can bolster the effectiveness of their pandemic response. The note is organized into two main sections (understanding that there may be overlap between both):

- i) immediate measures to invest in the safety and wellbeing of the workforce
- ii) longer-term measures to support key stakeholders including suppliers and communities

As general guidance, companies should first a) consult official government advice for employers, b) begin with assessing and strengthening existing workplace provisions, c) follow best practice when implementing new policies, consulting also with investors on expectations and performance standards, and d) seek opportunities to partner with local experts where possible.

Women are at higher risk of exposure to COVID-19 primarily because they:

- Make up approximately 70 percent of the global [health](#) and [social](#) sector workforce
- Are the majority of care workers for children, the elderly and the sick—professionally, as well as within their own families
- Make up a large percentage of customer service and hospitality workers—roles that put them into close or frequent contact with others, and that are likely to be deemed “essential” even during lockdowns

Women are more vulnerable to economic shocks from the pandemic because they:

- Globally hold more low-paying, part-time, or informal jobs (with fewer employment protections) than men
- Do a disproportionate share of housework and child rearing, or are more likely to give up their jobs to manage the increase in childcare responsibilities
- Will have a more difficult time returning to their prior income levels, as evidence from Ebola shows



Creating Markets, Creating Opportunities

¹ <https://www.investopedia.com/stakeholder-capitalism-4774323>

INVESTING IN THE SAFETY AND WELL-BEING OF THE WORKFORCE



BUSINESS CHALLENGE

Health burden within the workforce

The virus has now spread to most countries globally, and it is highly likely that all businesses will have employees who fall sick. Without proper testing, treatment, preventative measures, and public health messaging, numbers will rapidly increase. Female workers are also more likely to be negatively impacted by reduced access to contraception and family planning services.

Retention of female and male staff

Lockdowns, quarantines, and mandatory business closures have forced many employers to lay off or furlough staff, while requiring others to switch to home-based work. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to increase the risk of women dropping out of the workforce due to the extra care responsibilities that fall disproportionately on women including childcare, eldercare, care for sick relatives, schooling, food prep amid scarcity, and additional housework. It is important to have women represented in leadership roles at every level of decision making—particularly during crisis response—to ensure diverse realities and interests are considered.

Ensuring safe workplace facilities and PPE (personal protective equipment) for women and men

Workplace facilities during the pandemic should account for gender-different needs in terms of health, safety, sanitary and lactation provisions, properly fitting and designed PPE, and childcare support.²

Productivity losses linked to mental health risks

Mental health issues are likely to impact both male and female employees, contributing to absenteeism, presenteeism (working while sick) and lower productivity. Women and men may experience and deal with stress differently, according to social roles, pressures and cultural norms. With healthcare systems already stretched and social distancing or quarantines disrupting the functioning of extended family/community support and other social safety nets, employees are likely to have limited access to other means of support.

GENDER SMART STRATEGIES

- Provide free testing and medical treatment for staff
- Ensure continued access to essential health services that may be impacted, particularly for female employees (i.e. maternal and reproductive health)
- Amplify official public health information and messaging daily to the workforce and encourage employees to make their families and friends aware of the latest guidance to stay safe. Messaging should consider the different domestic and caregiving roles of women and men, and be tailored to fit cultural/social norms.
- Make available sanitary products and contraception free of charge in the workplace.

- Offer employer-provided childcare near to or at site for the children of essential employees, and childcare vouchers or grants to enable those working from home to pay for support where available. Childcare for essential workers during the pandemic is an investment in the continued business operations and in the productivity and morale of employees.
- Implement paid paternity and maternity leave, where provisions do not yet exist.
- Enact flexible work schedules and remote working for employees when possible, and limited-time paid leave or sick leave for those whose extra care duties prohibit them from working.

- Ensure that disinfectant, handwashing stations, and masks/other essential PPE in correct sizes are available to male and female employees, and distancing measures are enacted where possible.
- Cater for the needs of breastfeeding mothers: for example, lactation facilities and cold storage with appropriate sanitary measures, or more time to go home and breastfeed.

- Company management should set an example by emphasizing the importance of prioritizing mental health, normalizing the challenges people may be facing, being flexible and understanding with pressures workers are under, and leading by example.
- Make available free and confidential counseling via phone or video calling with a trusted professional, virtual listening groups, resources for at-home exercise and movement challenges where possible, peer support action networks, and team morale-building activities.

KEY RESOURCES

- 🔗 IFC [‘Interim Advice for IFC Clients on Preventing and Managing Health Risks of COVID-19 in the Workplace’](#)
- 🔗 UNICEF [‘Family Friendly Policies and Other Good Workplace Practices in the Context of COVID-19’](#)
- 🔗 UN Women [‘Gender Equality Matters in COVID-19 Response’](#)
- 🔗 IFC [‘Childcare in the COVID-19 Era: A Guide for Employers’](#)
- 🔗 IFC [‘Tip Sheet for Company Leadership on Crisis Response: Facing the COVID-19 pandemic’](#)
- 🔗 UNICEF [‘Family Friendly Policies and Other Good Workplace Practices in the Context of COVID-19’](#)
- 🔗 IFC [‘Interim Advice for IFC Clients on Supporting Workers in the Context of COVID-19’](#)
- 🔗 UNFPA [‘COVID-19: A Gender Lens’](#)
- 🔗 IFC Gender Toolkit [‘Unlocking Opportunities for Women and Business’](#)—Tool suite 1: Increasing Gender Diversity from the Workforce to the Boardroom

- 🔗 IASC [‘Addressing Mental Health and Psychosocial Aspects of COVID-19’](#)
- 🔗 WHO [‘Mental Health and Work: Impacts, Issues and Good Practices’](#)
- 🔗 World Bank [‘Harnessing Technology to Address the Global Mental Health Crisis: An Introductory Brief’](#)

² While childcare is not solely the concern of women, the burden of care generally falls disproportionately on women.

BUSINESS CHALLENGE

Economic costs of gender-based violence

Gender-based violence carries a heavy economic toll for businesses. Crises, disasters and epidemics are known to lead to a rise in domestic violence. Isolation, feelings of loss of control, economic hardship, and stress can all be triggers for abusers. During the last month of lockdowns, overwhelming data from around the world shows a surge in domestic and family violence, in both developed and developing countries.³

GENDER SMART STRATEGIES

- Work with local responders to ensure that key support services such as helplines, shelters, medical facilities and legal aid remain available / open.
- If companies do not already have Gender-Based Violence guidelines or policies in place, engage an expert to develop a suitable response framework including key messaging for employees on violence prevention and where to access resources / help.

KEY RESOURCES

- 🔗 IASC '[COVID 19 Resources to Address Gender Based Violence Risks](#)'
- 🔗 IFC Gender Toolkit '[Unlocking Opportunities for Women and Business](#)'—Toolsuite 4: Gender-Based Violence.

SUPPORTING SUPPLIERS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES



BUSINESS CHALLENGE

Competitive rapid sourcing of key PPE and hygiene supplies

Companies will require increased volumes of key hygiene products including soap, disinfectants, hand sanitizers, masks, gloves, and other essential PPE items – for their own operations, and potentially for community distribution. Some of these items may be difficult to procure, with high prices and limited availability in global supply chains.

GENDER SMART STRATEGIES

- Scope out possible suppliers for locally made soap and masks. The production of soap and garment manufacture are often areas where female owned businesses are active.
- Inform local suppliers, including those owned by women and youth, to make them aware of procurement needs and work creatively with financing terms to enable these suppliers to fulfill contracts.

KEY RESOURCES

- 🔗 IFC Gender Toolkit '[Unlocking Opportunities for Women and Business](#)'—Toolsuite 2: Women-Owned Businesses and the Supply Chain.
- 🔗 Washington Post '[The Kenyan Factory that transformed into a Surgical Mask Assembly Line Overnight](#)'

Accurate data on impacts for key stakeholders

Businesses need access to data on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their key stakeholders, particularly local communities and suppliers, to inform resource allocation and coordinate response with government and other partners. Gender-disaggregation improves the accuracy of data.

- Set up simple survey systems to collect gender disaggregated data on the impacts of the pandemic on suppliers and consumers
- Work with youth or women's associations in the community to design and carry out virtual gender-disaggregated data gathering and engage target groups online.

- 🔗 IFC Gender Toolkit '[Unlocking Opportunities for Women and Business](#)'—Toolsuite 3: Women and Community Engagement.
- 🔗 Care and IRC '[Rapid Global Gender Analysis for COVID-19](#)'

Public health messaging

Curbing the spread of COVID-19 requires helping to bring public health messaging into local communities. Although women often carry more of the burden for care work, there is a gender gap in access to critical public health messaging and information as compared with men due to lower literacy levels, lack of representation in decision making, and lower access to information/ networks. This is a missed opportunity, as women have the potential to be highly effective in vector control due to their community relationships and influence over household management and hygiene practices. It is also key that messaging considers social roles and cultural norms.

- Increase the formats, types, and languages of messaging and awareness raising related to COVID-19 – and ensure these messages gain broad community reach, particularly with women.
- Use platforms like Viber, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram as well as dropping pictorial leaflets and making large format visual information available in public places.
- Coordinate with government and local civil society groups to avoid mixed messaging or confusion, and to ensure messages are tailored to social roles and cultural norms.
- Work with women's groups and associations to disseminate messaging.

- 🔗 IFRC '[Coronavirus Risk Communication and Community Engagement Strategy](#)'
- 🔗 IASC '[COVID-19: How to Include Marginalized and Vulnerable People in Risk Communication and Community Engagement](#)'

³ <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/06/827908402/global-lockdowns-resulting-in-horrifying-surge-in-domestic-violence-u-n-warns>

BUSINESS CHALLENGE

Hygiene provisions in local communities

Frequent hand washing is the most important individual step required to prevent the spread, but many communities where companies operate can't afford regular water tariff payments. Women are disproportionately affected by lack of proper water and sanitation, due to their traditional roles as the main water managers of the household and caregivers responsible for the health and hygiene of children, the elderly and the sick.

Provision of essential food and medical supplies in communities

As lockdowns impact exports and supply chains, many communities will suffer from food insecurity and lack of essential medical supplies. Women tend to carry the responsibility for feeding their families, and may struggle to meet these needs, resulting in hunger, malnutrition and higher risk of infection if exposed to the virus. During epidemics women's health often suffers disproportionately—maternal mortality increased, for example, during the Ebola outbreak when medical care was not available for mothers in need, and women chose riskier home births to avoid hospitals. At the same time access to contraception, reproductive healthcare and sanitary products decreased.

Elevated risk of gender-based violence in communities

Quarantines and lockdowns globally are creating an elevated risk of gender-based violence, compounded by increased incidence of mental health disorders, isolation, and the reduced availability of normal support services. Women, especially in poorer households with dependent children, are particularly at risk.

Lack of access to capital for female suppliers and for community recovery

Given the economic slowdown and job losses due to COVID-19, access to capital is a key need in order to tide families over. Women typically find it more challenging to access capital due to their lower rates of savings, lack of networks (decision-making; information) and absence of collateral as compared with men. However, as women tend to manage household purchasing and the purchase of key supplies, it is essential that money goes directly into their hands.

GENDER SMART STRATEGIES

- Liaise with local authorities to consider partially subsidizing community water tariffs to allow continued water access,
- Harness company logistics and supply chains to distribute essential supplies to communities including water tanks, purification tablets, soap, and disinfectant
- Work through local women's groups to increase chances of hygiene measures being followed, and to elevate women's participation in community leadership.

- Coordinate with aid agencies and government to leverage company logistics for distribution of food aid and essential medical supplies.
- Work through company-community relationships to ensure the involvement of women in these efforts, given their roles in family food security and care.
- Support local seed banks and agricultural extension groups to provide aid to families, especially women, who are typically responsible for growing crops.⁴
- Offer community members testing and care at company clinics, and support continued access to essential healthcare especially for mothers, young children, and pregnant women.

- Raise awareness among community members about the risks of gender-based violence during quarantines
- Work with local responders to ensure that key support services such as helplines, shelters, medical facilities and legal aid remain available, open and free at point of use to those who need them.

- Partner with local microcredit or savings and loans groups to extend low cost loans into communities and to female owned businesses in the company supply chain. Ensure community finance options are available to both men and women.
- Encourage communities to access and use mobile money platforms.
- Work with trusted local partners to build capacity among the community and among local women-owned suppliers for small business planning in the aftermath of the crisis.

KEY RESOURCES

- 🔗 PAHO '[Key Resources on Water Sanitation and Hygiene: COVID-19 in the Community](#)'
- 🔗 World Bank '[Latin America Moving Fast to Ensure Water Services during COVID-19](#)'
- 🔗 WaterAid '[Violence, Gender and WASH Toolkit](#)'
- 🔗 IASC '[Gender Alert for COVID-19 Outbreak](#)'
- 🔗 IFC Gender Toolkit '[Unlocking Opportunities for Women and Business](#)'—Toolsuite 3: Women and Community Engagement.
- 🔗 IASC '[COVID 19 Resources to Address Gender Based Violence Risks](#)'
- 🔗 UK AID and GIZ '[Promoting Women's Financial Inclusion: a Toolkit](#)'
- 🔗 WEF '[West African Switching to Mobile Money During COVID 19 Crisis](#)'

⁴ <http://www.fao.org/family-farming/detail/en/c/1195074/>