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# Gender Impact of COVID-19 in Pakistan: Contextual Analysis and the Way Forward

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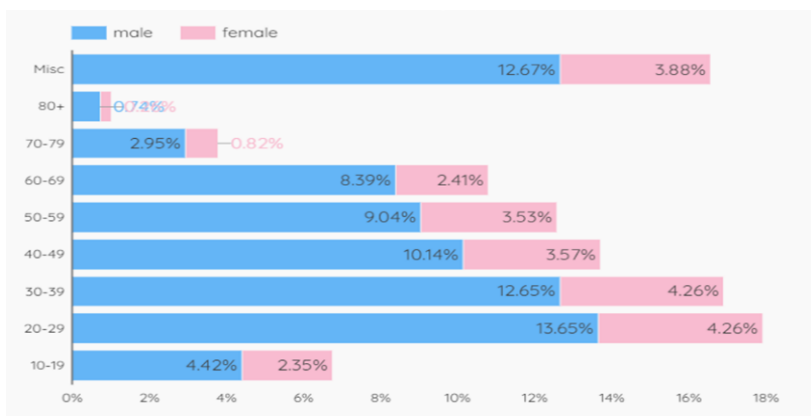
## Introduction

This paper provides a brief analysis of some of the anticipated gender-differentiated impacts of COVID-19 in Pakistan, including women’s social, economic political and electoral participation, to contribute to more gender-responsive approaches. The paper underscores the dual priorities of integrating a gender and inclusion perspective into all policies, programs and relief measures related to COVID-19 to effectively safeguard women and other marginalized and at-risk populations; and ensuring that the temporary rolling back of some fundamental human rights, such as freedom of assembly, association and mobility,<sup>1</sup> are fully and promptly restored and in equal measure for all genders. While more research is needed into the impact of COVID-19 on doubly marginalized populations – such as women with disabilities, young women, migrant women and older women – the paper provides an initial framework to inform more inclusive approaches going forward.

## Context: COVID-19 in Pakistan

Much like in other countries across the globe, there is growing realization of the significant threat that the new coronavirus poses to Pakistan’s population of 222 million, about half of whom are women.<sup>2</sup> It also includes at-risk populations, such as approximately 33 million persons with disabilities, 60 percent of whom are estimated to be women.<sup>3</sup> Since early March, cases have continued to increase across Pakistan, with the highest number of cases recorded in Punjab.<sup>4</sup> Figure 1 provides the demographic breakdown of the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases as of April 14. However, it is important to note that the comparatively lower levels of women’s cases could be a result of lower rates of testing for women, rather than a lower rate of infection.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1: Demographic Split of Male (Blue) Versus Female (Pink) COVID-19 Infections as of April 14, 2020. Source: covid.gov.pk**



The government of Pakistan has established a Command and Control Center to ensure effective coordination among the federal and provincial governments, serving as a centralized mechanism for regularly sharing information and updates on the disease, as well as directing measures related to the provision of health and relief supplies and coordination of screenings. However, even with these and

<sup>1</sup> Article 15-18 of Constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973

<sup>2</sup> National Population Census, 2017

<sup>3</sup> The World Health Organization estimates that 15 percent of the world’s population has a disability. World Health Organization and World Bank, “World Report on Disability,” 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Numbers are fluid and are updated on the government website daily at [the Government of Pakistan website](https://www.gov.pk).

<sup>5</sup> Independent (February 28, 2020). [“Why coronavirus affects men more than women.”](https://www.independent.com.pk)

other measures the government is taking, the impact of COVID-19 is likely to be devastating. COVID-19 will further depress an already weak economy and tax an insufficiently resourced health system already grappling with inadequate tertiary-care facilities and health care personnel. Women – especially women with disabilities and young women – and transgender persons will be disproportionately negatively impacted as COVID-19 exacerbates existing challenges related to systemic discrimination, less access to political rights, weaker socio-economic standing and higher rates of vulnerable or informal employment.

Experience from past international outbreaks – such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003, Ebola from 2014-16, and Zika from 2015-16 – highlights the importance of incorporating a gender analysis into all preparedness and response measures as pandemics and humanitarian crises impact men and women differently.<sup>6</sup> In the context of Pakistan, substantial empirical evidence produced by United Nations (UN) agencies, the National Disaster Management Authority and civil society organizations (CSOs) during various humanitarian crises, such as the floods of 2010 and earthquakes in 2005, underscores how women and other marginalized groups suffer disproportionately due to the unequal gender and power relations that determine access to and control over resources.

Pakistan has adopted numerous laws that legislate equality-based principles. Perhaps most notably, the Constitution of Pakistan provides for the fundamental rights of all its citizens, including establishing that all persons are equal before the law and are entitled to the equal protection of the law (25:1), and states that there shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex (25:2). The Constitution also calls for steps to ensure the full participation of women in all spheres of national life (Article 34). Complementing its Constitution, Pakistan has also recently adopted acts that specifically protect the political rights of marginalized groups – such as persons with disabilities and transgender persons. These include the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which protects the rights of women with disabilities to humanitarian assistance (Article 11) and health care (Article 25), as well as the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, passed in 2018, which outlines equal rights to legal identification, voting and economic security. Pakistan is also signatory to the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (2006-15), which includes a commitment to taking affirmative and direct action to establish gender equity and equality of treatment for all young people.

Despite these legal frameworks, however, weak governance systems and a lack of enforcement of legal instruments undermine access to rights, particularly for women with disabilities and transgender people. Though the empirical evidence regarding the extent and scope of the gender-differential impact of COVID-19 in Pakistan is yet to be established, women and most marginalized communities will likely experience disproportionate hardship from this crisis.

At the same time, the pandemic provides an opportunity to reevaluate and reimagine social and governmental structures. It is possible that Pakistan, and the world more broadly, after social isolation and the shock of the pandemic will look dramatically different. As frontline health workers and elected leaders, women are already taking lead roles in combating COVID-19 – experiences that should continue to influence the extent of women's leadership beyond the current health crisis.

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<sup>6</sup> The Atlantic (March 2020). "[The Coronavirus is a Disaster for Feminism.](#)"

## National Level Framework and Policy for Relief Measures

After the first two cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in Pakistan in March 2020, the Sindh provincial government was the first to take immediate action by announcing a partial lockdown in the province and an appeal for residents to stay home and maintain social distancing. Similar measures were subsequently followed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Punjab, Balochistan and the federal government. The government has adopted a National Action Plan for COVID-19. The plan comprehensively covers many policy issues and actions that the local and national governments and state departments will undertake. However, the plan has not sufficiently considered the measures needed to ensure that women and historically marginalized groups, such as persons with disabilities and transgender individuals, are equally able to access health facilities and safely practice self-isolation and social distancing.

To implement the National Action Plan, a number of committees have been set up. However, these committees are dominated by men with negligible representation from women. Nationwide – as outlined in Figure 2 – **women represent only 5.5 percent of the COVID-19 committee members**, reflecting a broader issue with low levels of women’s representation among senior government and decision-making positions. For instance, there is only one woman on the 16-member Emergency Core Committee for COVID-19, which is also responsible for drafting the National Action Plan. Similarly, only one of the seven members making up the Committee of Scientific Taskforce on COVID-19 is a woman, and all of the nine members of the Balochistan Control Room Committee, set up to provide urgent and coordinated COVID-19 responses, are men. Surprisingly, neither the Human Rights Ministry nor the Women’s Development Departments – both essential to the role of highlighting a rights-based response – are part of the COVID-19 coordination effort.

**Figure 2: Women as a Proportion of Committee Representatives<sup>7</sup>**

	Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT)	Punjab	Sindh	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Balochistan	Pakistan
Women in COVID-19 Response Committees**	5	7	1	1	0	<b>14</b>
Men in COVID-19 Response Committees**	68	62	9	52	62	<b>253</b>
<b>Ratio of Women to Men</b>	<b>7.35%</b>	<b>11.30%</b>	<b>11.10%</b>	<b>1.92%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>5.53%</b>
<i>**These numbers do not reflect all COVID-19 response activities being undertaken in Pakistan but a small sampling.</i>						

<sup>7</sup> Notifications by national and provincial governments

In March, the prime minister announced a 150 billion Pakistani rupees (approximately \$950 million) package for low-income populations, including those who lost daily wages due to the pandemic. The stimulus is expected to provide each household with 3,000 rupees (approximately \$20) per month for the next four months. As part of its efforts to reach low-income families, the government of Pakistan is utilizing its national social safety net program “Ehsaas” to disseminate funds and coordinate food donations. For the fund dissemination, families enrolled in the existing “Ehsaas Emergency Cash Program” have been advised by text message to submit their National Identity Card (NIC) numbers through a government-maintained online portal to access financial aid, up to 12,000 rupees (approximately \$75) per family. An Ehsaas Ration Platform has also been launched to connect people wanting to donate food rations to those in need. As of now, 35,000 families and over 600 donors have registered on the online portal.<sup>8</sup> One critical challenge with this response, as noted below, is that **women are less likely to have a NIC card, which is essential to access government aid.** Indeed, at least 12 million fewer women across Pakistan have NIC cards than men<sup>9</sup>.

The Corona Relief Tiger Force, a youth volunteer-based program, is another initiative launched by the prime minister. Its primary goal is to assist the civil administration in containing the spread of COVID-19 and mitigating its negative impacts by distributing food and raising awareness of common preventative measures that can be taken to limit infection. As of April 7, the Corona Relief Tiger Force has recruited up to 700,000 young volunteers,<sup>10</sup> **of whom only around 2,000 are women (0.28 percent).**<sup>11</sup> The lowest registration rates of women came from Balochistan, KP and Gilgit Baltistan.<sup>12</sup> While the reasons for such low female engagement in the Tiger Force are yet to be examined, restrictive social norms, cultural barriers and concerns for safety could be contributing factors. What is evident from the figures is that the government could have taken the steps needed to mitigate concerns around young women’s participation and proactively recruited young women to ensure that they are equally able to participate as active stakeholders and leaders in these and other COVID-19 initiatives. This in turn could positively impact outreach to women – especially women-headed households – who may be reticent to engage with male volunteers.

## Gender Implications of COVID-19 in Pakistan

Asymmetrical gender and power relations continue to impact women’s social, economic and political participation, as evidenced by numerous indicators, and will likely be exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. The literacy rate for Pakistani women, for example, is 56 percent, compared to 76 percent for men, with the literacy rate for historically marginalized women even lower. At 44 percent, women’s low labor force participation rate is nearly half that of men’s (85 percent), although it should be noted that such figures generally capture more formal labor and not the informal work that women undertake. As a result of these and other factors, the World Economic Forum’s *2020 Global Gender Gap Report*, which measures gender equality in relation to economic participation and opportunity, educational

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<sup>8</sup> Government of Pakistan, Poverty Alleviation and Society Safety Division. [Ehsaas Rashan Portal](#).

<sup>9</sup> ECP Electoral Roll December 2019

<sup>10</sup> Government of Pakistan. April 2020. <http://crt.covid.gov.pk/>

<sup>11</sup> Government of Pakistan. April 2020. [“COVID-19 Relief Tigers.”](#)

<sup>12</sup> Government of Pakistan. April 2020. [“COVID-19 Government of Pakistan.”](#)

attainment, health and political empowerment, ranked Pakistan 151 out of 153 countries. Within this socio-cultural context, proactive measures are needed to ensure that women, especially women from the most marginalized groups, are able to equally access the government's relief measures and to practice their democratic rights as citizens. The following section considers the key political and socio-economic impacts that must be accounted for in COVID-19 responses.

## **Impact on Women's Political and Electoral Participation**

*Local Government Representation and Participation:* Although the tenure of most of Pakistan's local governments ended in 2019, as COVID-19 spread, provinces were quick to announce indefinite postponements of elections. While it is critical to adopt a do-no-harm approach to elections – including by ensuring that holding electoral events does not expose voters and other electoral stakeholders to heightened risks of infection – the absence of functioning local governments during such a health crisis poses challenges. From a gender perspective, the absence of a functioning local government system has severe implications on the already low number of women representatives in political decision-making bodies. Local bodies reserve from 20 to 30 percent of seats for local women representatives who could otherwise play an active role in disseminating relief and development in their communities. Absent local governments, relief is being delivered through (thus far male-dominated) federal government initiatives – such as the Corona Relief Tiger Force – rather than by locally elected leaders who are more engaged with the communities and their needs. The fact that local government elections will not be held during the COVID-19 crisis underscores the urgency of engaging women community members, leaders and health workers in local level decision-making as well as resources for relief dissemination as part of the government's response.

The lack of an operational local government system also has broader governance implications as it limits how citizens can raise concerns about access to aid and issues with COVID-19 responses, much of which could otherwise be addressed by local government leaders. While this impacts all citizens, it may be particularly detrimental for women – particularly women from historically marginalized groups – who are less likely to have alternative networks through which to access relief, health and other COVID-19 resources.

*Election Commission of Pakistan:* In wake of the COVID-19 emergency, the immediate actions of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) included postponing a by-election scheduled to be held in mid-April without announcing the new prospective dates; temporarily closing the Gender and Training Wings; and encouraging all female staff to work from home, while simultaneously maintaining that essential staff attend work. Some of these measures – such as postponement of the by-election – were likely necessary to mitigate further transmission of COVID-19. However, it is anticipated that as soon as the ECP operations can safely continue, the Gender Wing will be immediately reopened to better ensure that the gender considerations for planning and holding overdue local government elections and by-elections are properly identified, especially if elections are held during the pandemic.

Indeed, if the pandemic is protracted into an election period, additional efforts will be needed to encourage women to participate as voters, candidates, poll workers and observers as the existing gap between women's and men's electoral participation is likely to be exacerbated by COVID-19 fears. This is particularly the case if male family members deem it too unsafe for women to participate in the



electoral process. A 2019 survey by Pakistan's Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives found that 43.4 percent of male respondents agreed that it is not inappropriate to stop women from voting if there were chances of fights breaking out at the polling station, suggesting a willingness to impose restrictions on women's right to vote when voting compromises their safety. Indeed, other country examples already underscore how safety concerns may restrict women's access to the polling station: In Bangladesh, which held a by-election in Dhaka in March 2020, voter turnout was at a historic low of 5 percent. Women's turnout did not even meet this threshold and in at least one case, a polling station's presiding officer noted that of the more than 2,000 women registered in a particular polling center, fewer than 20 cast a ballot.<sup>13</sup>

In this context, women with disabilities, particularly those under guardianship or who do not have access to independent transportation and assistance, are particularly at risk of having their electoral rights restricted by family intervention. It is critical that all potential voters are informed of any alternative voting options and that targeted voter education initiatives are implemented to ensure that all voters, including women with low or no literacy and women with disabilities, are aware of the precautions being taken to keep voters and poll workers safe.

An important question arises about the long-term impacts of continued electoral delays, and how the ECP can ensure that elections and political activities continue and are not be postponed indefinitely, while balancing the need to maintain health and safety. Worldwide, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) is monitoring the elections that have been postponed or indefinitely delayed. IFES continues to monitor these global developments and assess the implications on democratic rights.<sup>14</sup>

*Civil Registry and National Identity Card Registration:* A significant number of women are absent from Pakistan's civil registry, resulting in a lack of NICs and risking deprivation of basic citizenship rights. An estimate of the number of women who do not possess NICs can be drawn from the ECP's electoral rolls, since the rolls are compiled from existing NIC data maintained by the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA). As of December 2019, there were approximately 12.7 million eligible women lacking NICs, though the actual number may be higher when compared against provincial population data from the 2017 census.<sup>15</sup> The importance of a NIC cannot be overstated. In addition to serving as the identification needed to exercise one's voting rights, a NIC is also needed for Pakistanis to access certain welfare schemes, including the relief packages and other services that the federal and provincial governments are offering in response to COVID-19.

Beyond access to relief measures, there are also concerns that the already substantial gap of 12.7 million women who are neither registered for their NICs nor, subsequently, as voters may further widen during the COVID-19 pandemic. This widening would be due to the inability of the NADRA, which is responsible for issuing NICs, to operate during the crisis, as well as the inability of civil society partners, including IFES, to support NADRA and the ECP in identifying women who lack their NICs to add them to the NIC database and electoral roll.

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<sup>13</sup> The Business Standard (March 21, 2020). "[AL wins voterless Dhaka by-polls held amid corona fear.](#)"

<sup>14</sup> IFES (April 2020). "[Emergency Power and the Global COVID-19 Pandemic: Protecting Democratic Guardrails.](#)"

<sup>15</sup> ECP Data

An increased number of women – especially young women newly eligible for their NICs – will likely be absent from the voter list. Indeed, the absence of NICs for young women may have long-term, detrimental impacts on their electoral participation, as studies show that the time in which young people become enfranchised is important in establishing lifelong habits of participation in community and government affairs.<sup>16</sup> Transgender individuals also disproportionately lack access to a NIC, which as noted above, is currently needed to access government aid. Indeed, while the 2017 census identified 10,418<sup>17</sup> transgender people in Pakistan, the number of registered transgender voters with NICs was only 1,930 in 2018 – up from 687 in 2013<sup>18</sup> – underscoring the challenges transgender individuals have in accessing aid and government relief.

*Violence Against Women, Including Electoral Violence:* Violence against women (VAW) is a major public health problem and a violation of women's human rights. The 2017-2018 Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey<sup>19</sup> – which covers a large sample of the population from four provinces and the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas – found that 28 percent of women ages 15 to 49 have experienced physical violence since age 15. Eight percent of married and divorced women report that their husbands display three or more specific types of controlling behaviors. Thirty-four percent of married and divorced women have experienced physical, sexual or emotional spousal violence.

Perhaps most worrying, 42 percent of women and 40 percent of men agree that beating one's wife is justified in at least one of six specified situations.<sup>20</sup> Such violence is likely to be exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. On April 6, the UN secretary-general noted a “horrifying global surge” in domestic violence linked to lockdowns imposed by governments responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, and linked concerns about women's access to essential support services for gender-based violence.<sup>21</sup> Given sentiments toward VAW in Pakistan, there is good reason to believe that Pakistani women and girls are similarly facing elevated risks of violence. Access to shelters, hotlines, online counseling and psycho-social support systems are needed now more than ever. Additionally, it is important to note that women with disabilities and transgender individuals are two to three times more likely to be impacted by domestic violence than their peers.

In the electoral space, participation of women will become more challenging during the COVID-19 crisis. There may not be direct incidents of VAW in the electoral space – depending on how the state and the ECP respond to the COVID-19 challenge. However, there may be increased pressure on women's choices if and when an election is held. Irrespective of gender, political, electoral and social leadership inherently has the potential of violence and harassment. However, IFES recognizes that women leaders are already at greater threat for harassment and violence – both online and offline– due to the public nature of their work. As more women leaders publicly respond to urgent COVID-19 issues in their

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<sup>16</sup> IFES, International Republican Institute, National Democratic Institute and United States Agency for International Development (2019). [“Raising their Voices. How effective are pro-youth laws and policies.”](#) Pg. 44

<sup>17</sup> Pakistan Population Census 2017, though estimated by TransAction, a KP-based CSO, as more than 500,000

<sup>18</sup> As per the Electoral Roll of ECP 2018

<sup>19</sup> Government of Pakistan (2018). [“Population and Demographic Health Survey: 2017-2018.”](#)

<sup>20</sup> Government of Pakistan (2012). [“Population and Demographic Health Survey: 2012-2013”](#)

<sup>21</sup> UN News (April 6, 2020). [“UN Chief Calls for Domestic Violence Ceasefire Amid Horrifying Global Surge.”](#)

communities, it is likely that harassment will increase. Given this, the government’s National Action Plan should explicitly recognize the increased threats of VAW and identify gender-based violence and health service providers that are best able to respond.

## Social and Economic Impact on Women

While IFES is primarily concerned with the impacts of COVID-19 on women’s electoral and political participation, the following section provides a summary of some key considerations related to the likely socio-economic impacts on Pakistani women.

*Health Care Workers:* Women constitute almost 70 percent of the frontline health workers, including 96,000 lady health workers,<sup>22</sup> 28,000 community midwives,<sup>23</sup> approximately 62,651 nurses<sup>24</sup> and a considerable number of female doctors.<sup>25</sup> In Pakistan, these health workers, in the absence of proper safety gear and health facilities’ lack of preparedness, are at a heightened risk of infection when compared to the rest of the population. Additionally, given that women play a disproportionate role in household management, infection of female health workers could risk spreading illness to more at-risk groups – such as older persons and children – within health workers’ families. Women’s essential role as frontline health responders should be recognized not by imposing restrictions on their essential work, but rather by prioritizing that they receive the safety equipment needed to effectively mitigate the risks of COVID-19 infection. It is also important to recognize the incredible role that these women health workers play as frontline workers countering COVID-19 in their communities – a scenario that demonstrates women’s leadership in Pakistan.

*Economic Impact:* It has become clear that the COVID-19 crisis will have far-reaching economic impacts. Those expected to be the most affected by this crisis include workers in the informal sector and daily wage earners. In Pakistan, Human Rights Watch has warned authorities that social distancing, quarantine and the closure of businesses will have enormous economic consequences for garment and textile workers, domestic workers and home-based workers, the majority of whom are women, and has urged the government to take urgent steps to mitigate the economic impact. The Working Women's Helpline estimates there are around 20 million home-based workers in Pakistan, of which 12 million are women, although according to some unofficial estimates, women make up as much as 75 percent of the informal labor force.<sup>26</sup> Most of these domestic and informal workers are not registered with the Social Welfare Department and do not have any legal coverage, which impacts their ability to claim relief from the government. Women also disproportionately hold jobs in industries with poor protection, such as lack of paid family leave and paid sick leave. There is the added dimension of the disproportionate impact of domestic workers’ and caregivers’ inability to provide in-home care to people with disabilities who rely on this support.

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<sup>22</sup> Salam, R.A., Qureshi, R.N., Sheikh, S. et al. (2016) [Potential for task-sharing to Lady Health Workers for identification and emergency management of pre-eclampsia at community level in Pakistan.](#)

<sup>23</sup> Dawn News (April 2019). [“Health: Nursing Pipe Dreams.”](#)

<sup>24</sup> Business Recorder (June 2016). [“Approx. 62,651 Nurses Working in Pakistan.”](#)

<sup>25</sup> Pakistan Human Resources for Health Vision, 2018-30

<sup>26</sup> Asian Development Blog. [“How to protect Pakistan’s home-based workers.”](#)

COVID-19 will uniquely impact the economic security of transgender and persons with disabilities. A 2018 report highlighted that due in part to social exclusion and marginalization, transgender individuals are more likely to be low income and to make a living through informal – and sometimes risky – work.<sup>27</sup> With limited resources, transgender individuals are at greater risk of being unable to weather economic disruptions that will undoubtedly arise around COVID-19. Added to this issue, as noted above, transgender individuals disproportionately lack access to a NIC, which is currently needed to access government aid. The Special Talent Exchange Program, an organization working on the issues of persons with disabilities, has also highlighted similar concerns and demanded easy access to additional financial aid, which is also vital to reduce the risk of people with disabilities and their families becoming impoverished or further marginalized.

*Unpaid Work and Its Impact on Education:* It is important to note that in addition to the paid economic impact, women’s unpaid work is increasing during the pandemic with potentially negative implications on long-term educational outcomes. According to World Bank data, Pakistani women already spend on average 10.5 times more time than men on unpaid domestic care work, including household chores and caring for children and older relatives.<sup>28</sup> This leads to women being more time-poor and getting less time to spend on their own health and economic and skills development. Time poverty is being exacerbated during the COVID-19 lockdown, as schools close and Pakistani women are primarily left to shoulder the additional burden of homeschooling and family care, which directly impacts both women and girls. Indeed, with schools closing as part of social distancing measures, girls who already face pressure to drop out of school may not be able to return. In Pakistan, nearly 22.5 million youth are out of school, with the majority being girls. Almost 32 percent of primary school-age girls are out of school, compared to 21 percent of boys.<sup>29</sup> As economic and household pressures increase during the COVID-19 pandemic, pressure to drop out of school to care for siblings and support their households financially could widen the gap between girls’ and boys’ school enrollment, with long-term impacts on young women’s ability to participate in the workforce.

*Quarantine Facilities:* The federal and provincial governments have set up a number of isolation centers across Pakistan to quarantine people who are suspected to have COVID-19, and also near the borders to screen and quarantine those entering the country. It is alarming that some of these centers lack proper facilities. Several concerns have been raised over inadequate screening for the new coronavirus, squalid living conditions and a lack of treatment for existing health conditions. Consideration is further needed of the gendered implications of quarantine, such as whether women’s and men’s different physical, cultural, security and sanitary needs are recognized.

The National Plan of Action, for example, makes a cursory reference to lactating and pregnant women,<sup>30</sup> and the National Institute of Health (NIH) has developed guidelines for these centers that reference women’s needs. Despite this, neither the NIH guidelines nor the National Plan of Action

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<sup>27</sup> Bin Usman Shan, Hassan et. al. (June 2018). [“Challenges faced by marginalized communities such as transgenders in Pakistan.”](#)

<sup>28</sup> World Bank (May 2019). [“Enabling More Pakistani Women to Work.”](#)

<sup>29</sup> Human Rights Watch (November 2018). [“Pakistan: Girls Deprived of Education.”](#)

<sup>30</sup> National Plan of Action COVID-19, page 39

address sanitary needs, note the need to ensure that these facilities are accessible for persons with disabilities or note differential security needs for men and women.<sup>31</sup>

*Women's Limited Access to Technology:* In terms of equal access of men and women to technology, there already exists a severe digital divide by gender in Pakistan. According to the *2018 Global Digital Report*, women are 37 percent less likely than men to own a mobile phone or have internet access.<sup>32</sup> As the report further notes, 33 percent of the population in Pakistan has access to internet services, of which 21 percent are men and 12 percent are women. The overwhelming majority of these users reside in cities.<sup>33</sup> Women's limited access to technology further limits their direct access to COVID-19 awareness campaigns on social media and information about other health and relief-related measures being offered by the state. Women with disabilities may be at particular risk of lacking access to information and communications technology services if they do not have access to assistive technologies, such as screen readers. Similarly, in case of any health or financial crisis or violence, their access to essential services such as helplines and online platforms set up by the health departments, Human Rights Ministry, Women's Development Departments and national and provincial commissions could be restricted.

## Conclusion and Way Forward

With the future uncertain as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is also an opportunity for a renewed focus on rights for all and implementing improved rights-based measures that apply not only to the immediate pandemic, but to broader societal shifts that last for decades to come. Events of this magnitude have yielded incredible suffering and also incredible innovation and social change – bringing women to the workforce and elevating their role as community and national leaders, and sparking technological and medical advances that serve society. To harness this opportunity, it is imperative that the government consider and plan for the long-term impacts this pandemic may have on women – including women from at-risk groups, such as young women, women with disabilities and women from rural areas or more conservative households – and to work toward minimizing these consequences by further investigating and aligning existing policies and programs to safeguard and promote marginalized groups' access to democratic rights and COVID-19 response mechanisms.

## Key Recommendations

### *For the Government of Pakistan*

- Ensure **greater representation of women in COVID-19 decision-making committees** to more effectively integrate women's strategic and practical needs into overall responsive measures. It is also vital to ensure consultations with youth, persons with disabilities, transgender persons and religious minorities, including women from each of these groups, to better integrate their priorities and needs and ensure their access to COVID-19 health responses. These updated priorities should include a **stronger emphasis on gender-specific considerations and actions**,

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<sup>31</sup> Government of Pakistan, Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations & Coordination (March 2020). [“Guidelines – Establishing Quarantine Facility.”](#)

<sup>32</sup> The power of mobile to accelerate digital transformation in Pakistan, GSMA, 2019

<sup>33</sup> We are Social (January 2018). [Global Digital Report](#).

such as ensuring that women have adequate access to confidential gender-based violence helplines and resources, particularly during the lockdown period.

- Establish **alternative methods for accessing relief and COVID-19 resources** for women who do not possess NICs. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic NADRA can consider adopting interim measures such as issuing temporary ID cards or using simplified verification methods, to be confirmed for permanent registration after the lockdown has been lifted. Longer term, the NADRA and other entities should focus on NIC registration to help clear the growing backlog of women not registered for their NICs – a backlog that will be exacerbated during the COVID-19 crisis. An approach centered on state institutions might be the best way for NADRA to clear this backlog.
- Strengthen educational outreach on the reporting channels and services for survivors of domestic violence, and ensure that such **services are sufficiently funded** through the COVID-19 period and beyond.
- Work with civil society partners to conduct regular studies and assessments on the differential impacts of COVID-19 on women from historically marginalized groups, such as younger women, women with disabilities, migrant women, transgender persons and older women, and use findings to inform, adjust and reprioritize policy priorities.
- Work with the business sector to respond to the crisis in a way that not only considers girls and women but that also helps **transform unequal gender relations**. In the short term, this would include ensuring girls and women’s equal participation and voice in planning and executing crisis response. In the long term, it would include improving pay and conditions for key workers and unpaid caregivers and equal access to social protection and benefits for all women and marginalized groups – such as paid leave and immediate cash grants.
- Conduct a rapid **assessment of the quarantine facilities** from a gender and inclusion perspective to ensure a safe and enabling environment for all.
- Ensure that persons with disabilities receive information about infection-mitigating tips, public restriction plans and the services offered, in a diversity of formats, such as sign language, with the use of accessible technologies.

#### *For the ECP*

- Utilize the current period to analyze how **preparation for the upcoming elections, whenever they may be held, must be adjusted** to reduce potential COVID-19 transmission, including the safety of polling and other election staff and voters, security officials, observers and other stakeholders actively involved in elections. The ECP should ensure that its voter education dissemination strategy includes consideration of how women, in light of COVID-19, can access voter information. Given that women often lack access to technology, this needs to be considered when deciding how voter education materials will be distributed.
- Recommend that the provincial governments **promptly hold the local government elections as soon as the situation is no longer as immediately perilous**. The Elections Act of 2017 (Section 219:4) requires the ECP to ensure local government elections within 120 days of the end of their tenure. Given that the local government is one significant avenue women have to communicate their needs and policy priorities, it is critical that the elections occur once the environment is safer and proper mitigation measures are in place, and that this is not used as an excuse to further elongate and postpone the timings of the elections.



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