

Kvinna till Kvinna statement: A feminist perspective on the global response to covid-19

The outbreak of a new coronavirus (covid-19) in late 2019, was the start of the global pandemic which has quickly raised to unprecedented numbers of cases. In order to halt the rapid spread of the virus one country after the other has decided to close down big parts of society and many countries are now in a state of emergency. The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has supported women's rights organisations in conflict affected countries and in crises for many years, and we know that without a gender perspective on the response to covid-19, women's priorities will not be taken into consideration. If we, on the other hand, are determined enough, covid-19 could give us a possibility to transform this sudden change into a positive new direction and a chance to question status quo - unequal power distribution, unequal economic structures and patriarchal norms.

A crisis always reinforces already existing structure

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, supporting women's rights organisations in conflict affected countries, is deeply worried as we are once again witnessing how gender perspectives and women's rights are pushed aside when the international community is putting all its efforts into dealing with a crisis. For example, at EU ministerial meetings addressing the crisis, the gendered aspects are yet to be included.

Crises always reinforce structural differences and injustices in a society. As with conflicts, we know that most decision makers will tackle the corona-crisis and its aftermath the same way they tackle all crises. They will argue that "women's rights will have to wait, first we must deal with this acute crisis". We know that "later on" never comes. Now is the time to understand how women and girls are affected by the crisis, to address it and to invite women's representatives to come up with long term solutions to build a more resilient and inclusive society after the crisis.

Gender based violence is on the increase

As more and more countries are demanding their citizens to isolate themselves and stay in their homes, we are seeing reports from all over the world of an increase in gender-based violence. In France, domestic violence has increased by over 30 % since their lock-down began on the 17th of March, and similar reports are coming from the UK.¹ Gender based violence almost always increase in situations of stress and trauma. When the doors are locked and movement is restricted, it becomes even harder than in normal everyday life to escape from your abuser, even if only for a short time. Reports are also showing how, with more time at home in front of computers, online hate speech towards women in general and women's rights and LGBTIQ+ rights activist especially, tend to increase.

The lockdowns also affect the possibility of women's organisations to aid and assist the most vulnerable. Kvinna till Kvinna's partner organisations in Lebanon are reporting that shelters for domestic abuse victims are full and that more assistance is desperately needed in order to aid the women fleeing their homes. In Serbia, women activists are bringing emergency hotlines to their homes and private mobiles, which means they are constantly reachable. The lockdowns are putting different constraints on Kvinna till Kvinna's partners to carry out their work and all our partners are moving quickly to find creative solutions to ensure that they can continue to assist in the unfolding crisis.

Lockdowns and disruptions of normal social life also bring up traumatic memories for people who have suffered violent conflicts, especially in countries where the lockdowns and curfews are enforced by the military. The need for more psychosocial support will increase in these countries.

¹ <https://www.euronews.com/2020/03/28/domestic-violence-cases-jump-30-during-lockdown-in-france>

The democratic space is threatened

Another serious consequence of the crisis is how authoritarian regimes make use of the coronavirus and the extra-ordinary sanctions to strengthen their own power and shrink the democratic space for its citizens. The state of emergency that now exists in many parts of the world can be utilized by authoritarian leaders and regimes to restrict human rights and freedoms. We have seen how new democracies and authoritarian regimes spend more resources controlling and punishing citizens, than protecting the vulnerable. In Hungary the parliament has adopted a decree that gives President Orbán close to unlimited powers.² In Armenia the parliament has passed a bill which gives the government the right to access to all data from their citizen's mobile phones.³ We know from our cooperation with women's rights organisations around the world that women's rights are the first to be curtailed and women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights activists are those who are hit hardest when the civic space is shrinking.⁴ When many governments are taking their consular and embassy staff home, an important support and security mechanism for human rights activists is lost.

Women – hardest hit in a weakening economy

Due to the sanctions and restrictions preventing people from working, and businesses from staying open, productivity has decreased in most countries affected by corona and we are already seeing a major increase in unemployment and weakening economies all over the world. The economic crisis will hit women particularly hard as more women than men have unsafe jobs, work part-time or in the informal sector. Women are also not unionized to the same extent as men and do not have the same access to social security systems. We also know that women take on a large part of the responsibility for caring for their families and homes. Therefore, in countries with widespread poverty, weak institutions and social protection systems, women will be hit extra hard in the wake of corona.

In countries with underfunded health systems the corona response will have far fetching consequences as funds will be diverted from other health issues. This is something we saw already during the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone, where during an 18 month period 4,000 people died in Ebola, while 45,000 women and children died in maternal and child mortality. This was a result of hospital resources being reserved for the fight against Ebola and is a clear example of what can happen when the feminist perspective is disconnected from the strategies used to fight an epidemic.

Women, Peace and Security – a framework to build a more equal, sustainable and peaceful world

Local women's organisations hold societies together during crises and violent conflicts. Especially in countries where the government and its institutions are weak. Local women's organisations are very often first responders and can identify what needs to be done at an early stage, they are active at all stages of the crisis and remain there when it is time to rebuild society. UN Secretary General António Guterres has called for a global ceasefire during this global emergency situation, supported by at least 53 countries. Yemeni and Syrian women's organisations had already issued that call as part of their own covid-19 response. Armed groups in Colombia, Yemen, Syria, the Philippines and Cameroon have taken steps towards a ceasefire. There is an opportunity here to take the first steps towards sustaining peace in countries which have for long been in locked positions. It is important that the international community then makes full use of the promises of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and support women's participation in peace processes by offering immediate support to women's organisations and peacebuilders.

Although it might be difficult in the midst of chaos, we need to make an effort to cease this crisis as an opportunity. An opportunity to build a different, more equal, more sustainable and more peaceful society after the crisis. Right now, as millions are suffering from fragile health care systems, weak social protection systems, rampant domestic violence and the potential rise of authoritarian rule in several countries, the international community is witnessing the consequences of not having invested enough in

² <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/31/coronavirus-in-hungary-viktor-orban-rules-by-decree-indefinitely.html>

³ <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-seeks-to-stem-coronavirus-spread-by-tracking-phones>

⁴ <https://kvinnatillkvinna.se/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/kvinna-till-kvinna-suffocating-the-movement-report-eng-2018.pdf>

human security and sustaining peace. Let us take the opportunity and make this crisis into a turning point for the better.

Recommendations

Let us use the lessons learnt from crises and conflict settings and make sure we put a strong gender perspective into support, policies and post-corona reconstruction. For 27 years the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has worked side by side with women's rights organisations in the most difficult contexts. These are our recommendations:

The Swedish government and Sida should:

- Be a strong and loud advocate for a feminist perspective in the corona response. In a global crisis, cross-border cooperation and support for resource-poor countries is invaluable. Sweden's acclaimed feminist foreign policy is even more relevant for Swedish aid and development cooperation in times of crises. A feminist foreign policy recognises and prioritises the needs of the most vulnerable communities, including women of all ages, LGBTQI+ people, minorities, refugees and IDPs. A feminist perspective in the government's global response to corona is imperative.

Sweden, other member states, and the international donor community (including UN entities, International Financial Institutions and the EU) should:

- Make sure support is long-term and sustainable, and that the response to the acute crises also lays the ground for development of peaceful and inclusive societies where women's human rights are respected. Do not cut corners when it comes to gender equality and human rights, just because the situation is acute.
- Rapidly review the need for extra support to women's rights organisations and women's shelters, as a response to the increasing numbers of GBV and domestic violence cases globally as a result of lockdowns and curfews. Enable emergency funding to be used for immediate protection of women and children.
- Closely monitor developments of social unrest and violence conflict, that may result from the disruptions of social life, repressive and undemocratic policies and militarized responses, especially in post-conflict and fragile contexts. Local civil society including women's organisations can be crucial partners in mitigating these developments.
- Have a long-term perspective on how women's economic empowerment could be increased in poor countries in the wake of the coronavirus. When financial support plans are drawn up, it should be done in dialogue with representatives from women's rights organisations who know what measures could benefit and burden women respectively.
- Include local women's rights organisations in developing short term and long-term support programmes. Make sure that every support programme and policy has a clear gender perspective and has been reviewed by gender experts.
- Put pressure on authoritarian regimes to put time limits on corona measures that restricts the freedom and movement of citizens, that limit civic and political space and that is used to surveillance individuals, so that they can be uplifted as soon as possible after the corona crises is over.
- Prioritise funding which builds human security, including health, social security and employment opportunities, over military spending.