

* A better normal for women and girls after COVID-19

By Bambang Susantono and Anita Bhatia

2020 was synonymous with the COVID-19 pandemic and the unprecedented crisis it brought across economic, social, and health dimensions. 2021, on the other hand, is already being associated with the promise of the next normal.

For the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and UN Women, our new year's resolution is that we see more COVID-19 recovery strategies that prioritize the needs of women and girls in order to create a better and more egalitarian normal.

The Asia and Pacific region is providing some inspiring and concrete lessons on how a new normal can be more effectively achieved when gender equality is fully integrated into strategies, policies, and investments.

Governments across the region have shown that taking decisive and proac-

tive actions can mitigate short-term effects and pave the way toward a better normal for women. An ADB-UN Women high-level ministerial event held in fall 2020 for Ministers of Finance and Gender, and other senior representatives from Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Philippines, Samoa, and Thailand, shared good practices and policies to ensure women remain at the centre of COVID-19 response and recovery.

The Indonesian government's approach to implementing direct cash transfers encourages families to use maternal health and nutrition services, and motivates them to send children to school and focus on financial management. Similarly, in the Philippines, psycho-social support and specialized training for health sector workers includes recognizing and treating domestic violence, and providing referral advice.

In India, the government's investments in digi-



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tal infrastructure over the last six years have enabled 400 million citizens to open a bank account for the first time in their lives. Those bank accounts were leveraged during the pandemic to ensure direct cash transfers to the accounts of 220 million women. This principle reminds us to "leave no one behind" as we look to rebuilding our econo-



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mies.

Still, there is a great deal of work to be done. A UN Women survey found that more women in the region were likely to have experienced job loss and reduced paid hours than men. This is in line with other data indicating that women are concentrated in the most hard-hit sectors of the pandemic, such as

tourism, manufacturing, textiles, and garments. In some countries in the region, nearly half of women working in the particularly vulnerable informal sectors have lost their jobs since the outbreak began — more than double the rate of men.

Women's difficulty maintaining their paid work is further exacerbated by the increased time they are spending on unpaid care work, such as caring for their families and households. Before the pandemic, the International Labour Organization estimated that men in Asia and the Pacific performed the least amount of unpaid care work globally (average of 64 minutes per day). As a consequence, women in the region worked the longest hours in the world when their paid (262 minutes per day) and unpaid work (201 minutes per day) are combined.

Women spent an average 4 times longer than men on unpaid care work like tak-

ing care of children and family members and domestic chores. With the COVID-19 lockdown, the volume of unpaid care work has exponentially increased for both women and men, however, women still shoulder most of the burden.

There are many other negative pandemic effects on gender equality, including increased rates of domestic violence, maternal and infant mortality, and more girls dropping out of school, to name just a few. Female morbidity rates are lower, but the pandemic's socioeconomic impacts seem to be affecting women and girls more, with both short and long-term consequences.

Development partners like ADB and UN Women play a critical role in supporting governments to achieve a gender equality-focused recovery. For this reason, ADB and UN Women are recommitting to strengthen our existing partnership in key areas

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needed to build back better.

This includes sex-disaggregated data collection to better inform national and regional recovery policies; gender-responsive budgeting to ensure accountability and transparency toward gender goals; gender-responsive procurement to enable more women-owned businesses to access markets, working closely with both private and public sectors to develop tools and knowledge to prioritize

gender equality in business and investment decisions; and combating increased gender-based violence, one of the pandemic's most destructive consequences.

Many Asia and Pacific countries are showing that setting strong targets for women and girls in response and recovery programs, and developing specialised activities to mitigate COVID-19 effects are both realistic and necessary. In all of ADB's

emergency COVID-19 pandemic response packages, gender targets have been integrated across health, economic resilience, and social protection domains, reflecting the reality that recovery is not possible if half the population is left (further) behind.

We encourage all governments and development partners to make similar New Year's resolutions to put gender equality front and centre of their COVID-19 recovery.

Let's make sure that 2021 really does usher in a better normal for women and girls.

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