



THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON GENDER EQUALITY: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS MEETING

FINAL REPORT



INTRODUCTION

This report was prepared to evaluate "**The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Gender Equality: Problems and Solutions Meeting**", held by the Sabancı Foundation on June 30, 2020.

As Sabancı Foundation, since the day we were established, we have been working to ensure that our target groups **women, youth, and persons with disabilities** actively and equally participate in society. We sustained all of our social change programs; especially educational supports, institutions, cultural and art activities, and grant programs, with the vision of a society in which all individuals enjoy their rights equally. While structuring our programs, we have always adopted the evaluation of social needs as a principle.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected the entire world, has deepened the current social problems and intensified inequalities. We face **destructive effects in terms of women's rights and gender equality and the danger of losing our existing rights**. Thus, we organized a meeting with the organizations working in the field of gender equality, in order to share the concerns about women and girls, to evaluate the problems and solutions, and to establish solidarity.

36 participants from 29 organizations attended the meeting which was held closed via Zoom. In the first part of the meeting which started with the opening speech of the **Chair of Sabancı Foundation Board of Trustees Güler Sabancı**, field observations and foresights about the pandemic's effects in terms of gender equality in the world and Turkey were shared. In the second part of the meeting, solution and suggestions for collaborations were discussed in three break-out sessions: "Violence", "Economy, Employment, Entrepreneurship" and "Gender Equality, Education, Participation".

DISCUSSION ON PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

VIOLENCE

- The COVID-19 period shed a light upon the **absence of mechanisms** regarding struggle against gender-based violence, and the inefficacy of the already existing mechanisms. Efficient mechanisms should be put into place and be followed. It should be made sure that these mechanisms can be trusted at the heaviest crises 7/24. Particularly:
 - A **violence hotline** should be created, with the duty and authority to intervene with the denunciation. In addition to the hotlines which work on social support, a hotline which is only for struggle against gender-based violence should be developed and announced.
 - The capacity of the **women's shelters** should be increased; age-related needs and the needs of the women who live with their children should be taken care of; **inclusive methods** should be considered.
 - **At least one women's counseling center per city**, three in metropolitan cities, should be established and a network of women's shelters should be created.
 - **Sexual Violence Crisis Centers** should be established.
 - **Local emergency response plans** should be reviewed and executed
- The implementation of **already existing laws and conventions of which Turkey is a party**, especially the Law No. 6284, The Law of Protection of the Family and Prevention of the Violence Against Women, and Istanbul Convention, should be followed and watched over.
- Women's **awareness of legal rights should be increased**.
 - Women should be informed about their legal rights and protection mechanisms with printed and digital handouts distributed in the neighborhood units, local governments, pharmacies, malls, and bakeries.
 - Psychological and legal supports should be transferred to digital environments, solutions should be developed for any difficulties in access.
- It is found that in the first months of the epidemic, **legal support** was not available due to the closure of bars and courts.
- **The number of domestic violence reports by neighbors has increased** since everyone stays at home.
- With the transition to online and distance learning, it is estimated that **26% of the children are excluded from online education**. It is also estimated that most (around 90%) of **those children are girls**.
- Since the beginning of the pandemic, it has been revealed that especially **no application has been made to the authorities on child sexual abuse**. It is interpreted that since the children are not attending school, it becomes difficult to detect the domestic abuse cases.
- It has become particularly challenging for women's organizations **to reach women who do not have mobile phones**. In some cities, by means of the local organizations which are established before the pandemic, the information is received via neighborhood delegates. Second-hand mobile phones should be made available to women, and private sector should provide hardware and the distribution support on the matter.
- It should be ensured that **local governments provide their social assistance on a continuous basis rather than one-off aids** regarding the needs of women.
- Women's organizations should create their own **emergency action plans** and provide exemplary models for the government.
- **Women's organizations should develop networks** among themselves in order to create an organizationally integrated policy.
- **Warning mechanisms** should be developed for personnel who are found to be using violence in the workplace, and **the private sector should demonstrate that it is a party to the issue of preventing violence against women**.
- While determining the themes on grants, funding organizations should take into account the preliminary needs in the field of women's rights, and hear the demands of local women's organizations. Feminist

organizations operating locally and making policy recommendations should be supported to a greater extent.

ECONOMY, EMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

- With the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty has deepened much more, and the people who are already suffering from poverty have been the most affected. During the pandemic, it has been observed that families with registered or unregistered income at the minimum wage level **had to make a choice between sickness and hunger**, and they could not fully implement precautionary measures such as quarantine due to poverty.
- The pandemic period poses a threat to women's employment, as the sectors with the highest economic damage are mainly **women-dominated sectors**. Supports should be provided to the agriculture, food, and service industries, that are mostly affected by the crisis, and in which mostly women work.
- With the schools' closure due to pandemic, **many women had to leave their jobs and return home for childcare**.
- **Women** who are working in precarious jobs **should have access to basic social protection services** (from health insurance to paid sick leave, childcare, and unemployment benefits, etc.).
- There is a need to regulate women's working conditions with the implementation of covered wages and humane working conditions. Currently, women who are leaving women's shelters generally work in **informal and insecure jobs**. During the COVID-19 period, most of these women became unemployed. A mechanism should be designed to **prioritize the employment of women** subjected to violence or women who got out of shelters.
- Measures, which are taken to stimulate the economy, such as cash transfers, loans, and cancellation of debt, **must target all women** regardless of whether they are full-time, informal, part-time, or seasonal workers.
- Support for businesses should be extended to include **micro, small and medium-sized enterprises owned by women**, and severely damaged sectors and professions during the epidemic with mostly women employees.
- **In order to develop the cooperative employment model** and increase women's employment rate, the cooperatives should be provided with tax reliefs or technical support in marketing.
- Local governments should provide **tax deductions for women in obtaining licenses** in cases such as starting a business.
- **Domestic labor and care labor** (responsibility for child/elderly/patient care) has become the most complicated issue for women, especially during the pandemic. These tasks that are mostly undertaken by women, affect their employment and have created bigger difficulties with staying at home during the pandemic. In order to establish a balance in domestic labor, gender equality awareness activities should be conducted for everyone.
- **The closure of all kindergartens** within the scope of COVID-19 precautionary measures has further increased the burden of women's invisible labor and care responsibility. It is predicted that this problem will cause an increase in women's unemployment rate in the long term. Therefore:
 - Kindergartens should be opened in factories and workplaces, and special precautions should be taken for employees who have care responsibilities,
 - Kindergarten obligation should be imposed on local governments with legal regulations,
 - Kindergartens should be considered when designing places such as living areas like TOKI (government backed housing), organized industrial zones, shopping centers, etc.
- In order to solve the problem of women's participation in employment, especially decision-making mechanisms in the **business world need to have a gender equality perspective**:
 - To support women's employment, trainings should be provided to ensure that the private sector has awareness of gender equality,
 - Concrete steps and guidelines should be designed on how companies can review their policies and practices from the perspective of gender equality,
 - Studies should be conducted on flexible working models.
- To deal with the challenges of changing working life in the private sector, **strategies in line with International Labor Standards should be designed and implemented** to address gender issues related to COVID-19.

GENDER EQUALITY, EDUCATION AND PARTICIPATION

- The right of participation is one of the most critical issues. It has significant importance to **ensure the participation of women in the committees on pandemic** established in provinces. Policy recommendations, occupational health, and safety crisis action plans should be viewed from a gender lens.
- It has been observed that the municipalities could not easily identify the masses that need emergency services during the pandemic and had difficulty in delivering the necessary services because of the lack of **segregated data on urban poverty**.
- Local governments **should develop a gender equality perspective**. In addition, **a mechanism that includes psychological and personal development support should be established** for women working in municipalities and public institutions.
- **Advocacy should be done on the lack of official data**. During this period, it is observed that many institutions, except for some major non-governmental organizations, did not have a method that could record received applications. It has a crucial importance to keep trustable data about girls and women.
- It has been revealed that during the pandemic period, **women could not adequately participate in digital environments**. Many women could not make their voices heard, both due to the technical inadequacy, digital illiteracy, and the lack of facilities such as a computer or private room in their houses. Women who could come together in the public sphere were not able to achieve this in digital environments. Access to **internet is a human right**, therefore women's access to the internet should be seen as a rights struggle in the long term.
- Studies should be done on the division of domestic labor. In addition to the state, academia, the private sector, and the civil society should work on **raising awareness of both men and children on gender equality issues** within the scope of precautionary measures.
- **Funding organizations** should provide support to strengthen local women's organizations, ensure their involvement, and increase solidarity among women's organizations.

SOLUTIONS FOR COLLABORATION

In order to produce holistic solutions, the cooperation between international organizations, academia, civil society, the private and public sectors should be increased. Therefore:

- Women's organizations, private sector, academia, and funding organizations should **cooperate**,
- **A common action plan** should be developed for crisis periods such as pandemics and a gender-focused road map should be drawn,
- **Gender segregated data** should be collected in order to make more effective advocacy towards decision-makers,
- To ensure the equal participation of all women and to include everyone, the issue of **accessible digitalization** in the long term should be emphasized,
- Meeting networks and environments such as this very meeting should be multiplied,
- **Collaborations** between university units and non-governmental organizations working on gender equality should be strengthened; joint webinars, online training programs on gender equality, inclusion and diversity should be organized,
- New action plans should be pioneered with **a platform where everyone can present their work**, in which all activities such as a web page and blogs will be included.