



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality
and the Empowerment of Women



COVID-19 Response

Making Indigenous Women and Girls Visible in the Implementation of the UN Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19 Accessing Funds Through the Multi-Partner Trust Fund



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Background

The UN global framework for the immediate socio-economic response to the COVID crisis provides the strategic intent and blueprint for the operationalization at country level of the UN Secretary-General's report on the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

The UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF) is a UN interagency finance mechanism launched by the UNSG to support low- and middle- income programme countries in overcoming the health and development crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. A first call for proposals to the MPTF was launched mid-April 2020.

Although a global health pandemic, the impacts of COVID-19 are clearly spilling over into many other facets of life—quickly increasing unemployment, domestic violence, lack of information and limited opportunities to participate in decision-making including on matters related to the crisis itself.

Based on the MPTF's call for proposals UN agencies are to develop Joint Programmes between not more than four recipient UN agencies, to finance prioritized initiatives. Following the principle of 'Building Back Better' in a more equal and sustainable way, UN Country Teams (UNCTs) are tasked to apply the UN Sustainable Development Group's approved gender marker to the proposal, as well a gender lens on the description of the problem that projects aims to address.

While elements are in place to ensure that women and girls' resilience to COVID-19 and its impacts will be strengthened through the MPTF, it presents an opportunity to increase assistance to those women who are most often left behind.

This note provides a brief overview of the underlying structural inequalities and experiences of violence and discrimination faced by indigenous women and girls. It highlights recommended actions that Resident Coordinators and UNCTs could adopt under Windows 1 and 2 of the MPTF to support government efforts at addressing the health and socio-economic dimensions of the crisis. The note also advocates for measures that can be accelerated in the longer term.

The crisis at hand will exacerbate inequalities especially in vulnerable settings such as indigenous communities. Being born an indigenous woman or girl can be a life sentence of poverty, exclusion and discrimination, largely rooted in historical circumstances of marginalization. Personal and situational circumstances of sex, race, ethnicity, disability and location often combine to place indigenous women and girls on the brink. When one or more of the factors overlap—as is often the case—the risk of social exclusion and marginalization is not only perpetuated, but also acquires an enduring quality that can span over a lifetime and across generations.

The review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action reveals diverse forms of vulnerability faced by indigenous women and girls. These include disproportionate impacts on well-being resulting from large-scale land grabbing and dispossession because of unequal access to and control over land and natural resources, coupled with limited mobility, access to justice and decision-making power in the household and community.¹

¹ Report of the Secretary General. Review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and Outcomes of the 23rd Special Session of the General Assembly. E/CN.6/2020/3. Available at <https://undocs.org/E/CN.6/2020/3>

Indigenous women’s organizations estimate that approximately 50 per cent of the total indigenous population of 476 million are women.² Eighty per cent of the world’s people who identify themselves as indigenous are based in Asia (mainly China, South Asia and Southeast Asia), with populations ranging from about 8 per cent in China and India and 10 per cent in Viet Nam to 37 per cent in Nepal.³ While estimated numbers for those located in the Pacific are yet to be established, they mainly inhabit the four sub-regions of Oceania (Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia, as well as Australia and New Zealand). Latin America is home to an estimated 50 million indigenous peoples spanning 642 indigenous groups, with the majority located in Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru.⁴ In Africa, indigenous peoples are predominantly hunter-gatherers, pastoralists and agro-pastoralists scattered over an estimated 35 countries on the continent, according to the African Commission’s Working Group of Experts on Indigenous Populations/Communities.⁵

Addressing issues affecting indigenous women under two windows of the MPTF

Window 1: Enable governments and communities to suppress the transmission of the virus

Underlying considerations

- Indigenous women in low- and middle-income countries are less likely to be medically insured, due to historical circumstances related to colonial and neo colonial policies.⁶ They are therefore more likely to be affected by pre-existing conditions which exacerbate COVID-19.
- Indigenous women continue to face the fatal health impacts of environmental degradation and extractive industries, notably resulting in the pollution of water resources and ancestral agricultural lands, a phenomenon often described by indigenous women as “environmental violence”.⁷
- Available survey data from 16 low and middle-income countries across three key indicators demonstrates that indigenous women and adolescent girls are significantly less likely to benefit from services and have worse maternal health outcomes.⁸ In some contexts, indigenous women

² Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact. 2014. “Indigenous women and climate change”. Available at: http://ccmin.aippnet.org/attachments/article/1250/AIPP_CC_IP_Women_percentpercent20Final-T-J.pdf at p1. UN DESA since reported that the population of indigenous peoples stands at 476 million. See Indigenous Peoples and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Considerations. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2020/04/DESA-COVID-19-Considerations.pdf>

³ UNDESA, 2009. State of the Worlds Indigenous Peoples.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See reports of the Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Issues and the reports of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/SP/Pages/Welcompage.aspx>

⁷ Report of UN expert group meeting on violence against indigenous women and girls, 2012. Available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/meetings-and-workshops/2012-meetings-and-workshops.html>

⁸ UN Women, UNFPA and UNICEF. Indigenous women’s maternal health and maternal mortality. Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/4/indigenous-womens-maternal-health-and-maternal-mortality>

are twice as likely to die as a result of pregnancy and childbirth in contrast to the general population.⁹

- Stay at home orders have resulted in an escalation of domestic violence.¹⁰ In the context of COVID 19, UN Women describes violence against women as the “shadow pandemic”.¹¹ Women who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination are at greater risk of being subjected to violence. For instance, the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples finds that indigenous women are significantly more likely to experience rape compared to non-indigenous women and more than one in three indigenous women are raped during their lifetime.¹²

Recommended actions

- Ensure that women and girls have access to COVID-19 public health messages: The public health response must include the formulation and dissemination of targeted messaging on issues that address the different contexts and concerns of indigenous women and girls.
- Proposals from UNCTs must include interventions which support indigenous women’s access to quality treatment, infection control and prevention measures, especially when they lack medical insurance. Simultaneously, financial and human resources should be enhanced to protect the sexual and reproductive health of indigenous women, especially before, during and after childbirth, to help reverse high rates of maternal mortality.
- National Plans for Combating COVID-19 must include activities and funds for addressing limited access to health, including reproductive health services, that indigenous women and adolescent girls frequently face, as well as the poor health outcomes of those who have experienced early marriage and female genital mutilation.
- During testing and treatment for COVID-19, health systems must be mindful of the importance of respecting interculturality and the positive dimensions of indigenous peoples’ cultural practices, traditions and values in health delivery.
- Proposals must furthermore include designated safe spaces for indigenous women to safely report abuse. They must also integrate violence prevention efforts and essential services into COVID-19 response plans, while supporting culturally appropriate shelters and other indigenous women’s organizations on the front lines of the response.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ UN Women. 2020. COVID 19 and violence against women girls. Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls>

¹¹ UN Women. 2020. Statement of Executive Director. Violence against women and girls: the shadow pandemic. Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic>

¹² Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2014, A/HRC/30/41

Window 2: Mitigate the socio-economic impact and safeguard people and their livelihoods

Underlying considerations

- Indigenous women lag behind non-indigenous women on a range of socio-economic indicators, including with regard to employment, education and access to justice. Livelihoods are disproportionately affected by large-scale land grabbing and dispossession because of indigenous women's unequal access to and control over land and natural resources.
- The pandemic is deepening already existing inequalities in the gender division of labour, particularly at the domestic level, where indigenous women are at the centre of the care economy within their families and communities.
- In countries where data is available, evidence suggests that indigenous women tend to experience higher unemployment rates and lower earnings, in some instances below the minimum wage.¹³ Such employment and pay gaps correlate to lower levels of education and school completion.¹⁴
- Ancestral lands and territories are required for the survival and economic autonomy of indigenous women and are furthermore intrinsically linked to their identity and existence. Traditional occupations such as pastoralism on drylands, hunting and gathering, fishing, and rotation agriculture in tropical lands and territories possess material, cultural and spiritual meaning among indigenous women.¹⁵
- Patrilineal land tenure systems exclude indigenous women from land ownership and control. In the context of marriage and family, women and girls are excluded from property through inheritance and other means.

Recommended actions

- Ensure poverty analysis remains a dynamic process during as well as after the COVID crisis and in such procedures, prioritize data collection and analysis by sex, ethnicity, race and location.
- Advocate for strengthening existing social protection mechanisms (e.g., cash and in-kind benefits, including social insurance schemes). In this same context, ensure that ongoing fiscal response packages are implemented in an equitable manner and straddling this with the principle of leave no one behind.

¹³ For example, see Strategic Research. 2018. Aboriginal Women in the Canadian Economy. The Links Between Education, Employment and Income. Available at: https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/DAM/DAM-INTER-HQ/STAGING/texte-text/ai_res_aborig_econ_pdf_1331068532699_eng.pdf

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ UN Women. 2016. Strategy for Inclusion and Visibility of Indigenous Women. Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2016/12/strategy-for-inclusion-and-visibility-of-indigenous-women>

- Consult indigenous women’s groups through innovative means, to secure their views on equitable approaches for designing, reviewing and implementing stimulus packages.
- Address malnutrition among indigenous children and meet their ongoing food and educational needs through school meal programmes and access to learning opportunities. In doing so, take full account of potential discrimination against indigenous girls in the distribution and implementation of such services.

Post-COVID 19

Broader human rights contexts

When starting the recovery phase, UN country teams should support governments in accelerating the comprehensive implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, including by advancing indigenous women’s participation in public life; free, prior and informed consent; bodily autonomy; self-determination and collective and individual rights. These steps should go hand in hand with the accelerated implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with emphasis on leaving no one behind.

Recommended actions

- Bear in mind that indigenous women and girls are leaders in their own right, as seen in their dynamic contributions to global, regional and national agendas, such as those related to climate action and the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.
- Invest in measures that ensure indigenous women’s access to the highest attainable standard of health, including and sexual and reproductive health and reverse disproportionate high levels of maternal mortality.
- Break the silence on violence against indigenous women and girls and enhance the evidence through longitudinal research, data collection and analysis by sex, race, disability, ethnicity and location.
- Recognize the traditional management systems of indigenous women, who also possess both original and usufructuary rights to lands (e.g., nomadic systems, shifting cultivation).
- Help ensure that indigenous women maintain decision making rights on issues related to maintenance of their ancestral lands, and sacred and cultural sites.
- Support the reform of discriminatory legislation and policies affecting indigenous women’s collective and individual property and family rights.
- Assist in increasing access to land tenure and livelihoods, including entrepreneurship, and access to formal markets and financial mechanisms.

- Build capacities in resilience, disaster risk reduction and climate change mitigation with a gender and intercultural inclusion perspective.
- Encourage the full participation of indigenous women in all aspects of public life as well as in economic policy and decision-making at the local and national levels.
- Improve and/or help develop intercultural and gender-responsive services, including justice, transport, utilities, markets, water and energy, and green technology.
- Enhance collaboration and partnerships with human rights defenders who are at the frontline in the defense of indigenous peoples' ancestral lands, natural resources and livelihoods.