The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers

Gender Equity and Inclusion in the Time of COVID-19

Why Religious and Traditional Leaders Matter

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As COVID-19 continues to spread across the globe, concerns of equity and inclusion, particularly concerning gender, fall to the wayside even when research has demonstrated repeatedly that mainstreaming gender and inclusion strengthens the effectiveness of response planning.[1] Religious and traditional leaders can play a positive role in ensuring that the most vulnerable members of their communities aren't forgotten as people turn to their leadership for guidance and support. Not involving religious and traditional leaders in response efforts can be detrimental; when not engaged, religious and traditional faith communities can be left unaware of public health authorities' warnings about communal gatherings, turn to remedies that have no basis in science, or reproduce harmful practices of exclusion.[2]

There are several ways that religious and traditional leaders can play a positive role in supporting their communities through this crisis while supporting equity and inclusion and government officials should involve them in their prevention, response and recovery planning.

1. Religious and traditional leaders can remind their communities that caretaking is everyone's responsibility

   During crises like the current COVID-19 pandemic, caretaking responsibilities, both physically and emotionally, tend to fall more heavily onto women and girls, who often must also continue to find ways to support their families economically. Religious and traditional leaders can remind their communities that caretaking is the responsibility of everyone in order to more evenly distribute workloads. If they have the capacity, they can facilitate mutual aid networks that involve everyone in providing community needs within the guidelines of social distancing (using social media, phone lines and cell phone networks). While men appear to have a higher

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[1] Lafrenière, Julie; Sweetman, Caroline and Thylin, Theresia (2019) "Introduction: gender, humanitarian action and crisis response," Gender & Development, 27:2, 187-201

[2] Yee, Vivian. (2020) "In a Pandemic, Religion Can Be a Balm and a Risk." New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/22/world/middleeast/coronavirus-religion.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage

mortality rate with the virus, women may be more at risk of contracting it and thus spreading it due to their increased caretaking responsibilities either informally within their families or within healthcare settings.[3] Estimates place women at 70% of the healthcare workforce in the world.[4]

2. <u>They can work with families to encourage girls to keep studying</u>

   Research after similar viral outbreaks and other crises have shown that girls who experience a disruption in schooling are less likely to re-enroll than their counterparts. While out of school they also experience heightened sexual violence and increased rates of pregnancy.[5] As children are removed from school around the world to prevent the spread of the virus, religious and traditional leaders can work with families and schools in their communities to ensure that girls have the tools they need to continue studying and return to school when the threat abates.

3. <u>Advocate for public health responses that serve everyone</u>

   Best practices to prevent the spread of the virus are not available to everyone. Those who work in informal economies, live in close quarters or are mobile, such as refugees and migrants, often cannot practice social distancing and/or lack soap and clean water to practice frequent handwashing. People with disabilities can be particularly vulnerable as resources are diverted.[6] Religious and traditional leaders can advocate for public health responses and resource distribution that helps these vulnerable parts of their communities work toward prevention because they know their communities best.

4. <u>Help pregnant people navigate the local health system</u>

   During health crises, resources can be re-routed from obstetric care, making pregnant people more vulnerable. One study during the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone showed that fewer pregnant people accessed care and there was an increase in maternal mortality and stillbirth, often unrelated to the virus itself.[7] Religious and traditional leaders can encourage pregnant community members to access care by helping them to find safe ways to be monitored before and after birth. Calling hospitals and clinics to understand rapidly changing guidelines can be helpful for their pregnant

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[3] Caryn Rabin, Roni (2019), "Why the Coronavirus Seems to Hit Men Harder Than Women," <u>New York Times</u> https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/health/coronavirus-men-women.html

[4] WHO (2019), "Gender equity in the health workforce: Analysis of 104 countries," https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/311314/WHO-HIS-HWF-Gender-WP1-2019.1-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

[5] Jenkins, Robert, <u>UNICEF</u>, (2020), "Commentary: Ebola taught us why closing schools may be extreme," https://www.concordmonitor.com/Closing-schools-33403296

[6] Shapiro, Jospeh. (2020). "People With Disabilities Say Rationing Care Policies Violate Civil Rights." <u>NPR.</u> https://www.npr.org/2020/03/23/820398531/people-with-disabilities-say-rationing-care-policies-violate-civil-rights

[7] Jones SA, Gopalakrishnan S, Ameh CA, et al (2016), 'Women and babies are dying but not of Ebola': the effect of the Ebola virus epidemic on the availability, uptake and outcomes of maternal and newborn health services in Sierra Leone." <u>BMJ Global Health</u>.

community members. They can also ensure that pregnant community members understand public health directives.

5. Watch out for increased domestic and intimate partner violence

During crises, the rate of gender-based violence increases, especially against women and LGBQTA+ people.[8] The social isolation of quarantine can be used by abusers to increase violence against their partners. In one part of China, reports of domestic violence had tripled during the COVID-19 outbreak; the United States and the European Union have reported similar increases.[9] Religious and traditional leaders should believe survivors when they report abuse and help them to access resources in the community. There are several helpful guidelines for how religious communities can work to end gender-based violence.

6. Continue to work for gender equity during recovery

Studies have shown that after similar crises, the return to the former status quo often comes with rollbacks in economic and social equity, with men's wages more likely to return to pre-crisis levels than other identity groups. Women frequently work in informal economies or in part time work that suffer the most cuts during crisis and they are more likely to leave work during crises for caretaking responsibilities.[10] Religious and traditional leaders can become allies for gender equity and stand with other marginalized groups in their communities during the recovery period, advocating for equal pay and equal employment of all parts of their communities. Sharing safe employment opportunities is one way to help.

7. Engage youth in organizing response

Youth continue to be economically marginalized around the world, making them vulnerable to recruitment into extremist groups.[11] The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to continue to create a global economic crisis that will exacerbate these vulnerabilities. There is already some evidence that extremist groups are using language around COVID-19 to enhance recruitment strategies and to promote discrimination.[12] Religious and traditional leaders can encourage youth to continue studying at home, if possible, and to actively participate in mutual aid networks to create a sense of purpose. Youth are often well-versed in using social media and can help communities to create effective online platforms via existing social media

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[8] WHO (2018), "Violence against women: Strengthening the health response in times of crisis," https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/violence-against-women
[9] Godin, Melissa (2020), "As Cities Around the World Go on Lockdown, Victims of Domestic Violence Look for a Way out." Time. https://time.com/5803887/coronavirus-domestic-violence-victims/?fbclid=IwAR05vgeHBSA7-hoTBM3lXkhMUC4bDrf9FHjFiCezvuRYRezCGJnHIoZMgp0
[10] ILO (2018), "ILO: Women still less likely to be active in the labour market than men in most of the world." https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_619119/lang--en/index.htm
[11] Sommers, M. (2019). Youth and the Field of Countering Violent Extremism. Washington, DC: Promundo-US
[12] Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. (2020) "Snapshot: How extremist groups are responding to Covid-19," https://institute.global/policy/global-challenges/counter-extremism

channels to share accurate information about the virus and ways to access local resources.

Further reading:

- SIHA Network, (2020) "Corona Virus Dos and Don'ts are Blind to Urban Poor Women's Realities," https://sihanet.org/coronavirus-dos-and-donts-are-blind-to-urban-poor-womens-realities/

- Godin, Melissa (2020), "As Cities Around the World Go on Lockdown, Victims of Domestic Violence Look for a Way out." Time. https://time.com/5803887/coronavirus-domestic-violence-victims/?fbclid=IwAR05vgeHBSA7-hoTBM3lXkhMUC4bDrf9FHjFiCezvuRYRezCGJnHIoZMgp0

- Frederikson et al., (2020) "Coronavirus: A Look at Gender Differences in Awareness and Actions," Kaiser Family Foundation, https://www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/issue-brief/coronavirus-a-look-at-gender-differences-in-awareness-and-actions/

- Lewis, Helen, (2020) "The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism: Pandemics affect men and women differently." The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/feminism-womens-rights-coronavirus-covid19/608302/

- Gupta, Alisha Haridasani, (2020) "Why Women May Face a Greater Risk of Catching Coronavirus," New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/us/women-coronavirus-greater-risk.html

- Clare Wenham, Clare; Smith, Julia; and Morgan, Rosemary. (2020) "COVID-19: the gendered impacts of the outbreak," the Lancet, https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30526-2/fulltext#articleInformation

- Care, (2020), "COVID-19's Gender Implications Examined in Policy Brief from CARE." https://www.care.org/newsroom/press/press-releases/covid-19s-gender-implications-examined-in-policy-brief-care

- Willmer, Gareth, (2020), "'Gender blind' coronavirus policies could hinder disease fight," SciDev.Net. https://www.scidev.net/global/gender/news/gender-blind-coronavirus-policies-could-hinder-disease-fight.html

- Smith, Julia, (2020), "Gender and the Coronavirus Outbreak: Gender inequities make outbreaks worse, so why not integrate gender analysis into the response now to help save lives?" Think Global Health. https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/gender-and-coronavirus-outbreak

About the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers:

The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers was founded in 2013 as a concrete response to the increased awareness to include grassroots leaders and authorities to build sustainable peace. Since its inception, the Network has grown into a community of peacemakers ranging from grassroots religious and traditional actors to international NGOs, think tanks, and academic institutes, building bridges between grassroots peacemakers and global players in order to strengthen the work done for sustainable peace. The Network strengthens peacemaking through collaboratively supporting the positive role of religious and traditional actors in peace and peacebuilding processes.

https://www.peacemakersnetwork.org/