

Women, Business and the Law - The Gendered Impacts of COVID-19

Little research exists on the gender dimensions of disease outbreak and response. As the COVID-19 pandemic causes widespread societal disruption, a gender analysis could provide valuable insight into the ways in which vulnerable groups, such as women, are affected. In particular, strong legal frameworks and justice systems are critical for maintaining stability, safeguarding citizens' rights, and providing emergency relief during this time. Information about an economy's preparedness in the event of a pandemic, and any actions taken after its outbreak, will aid in creating effective and equitable policies and interventions in the future.

To assist in this effort, the *Women, Business and the Law* team is adding COVID-19 related research questions to its three surveys on labor, family, and violence against women legislation. *Women, Business and the Law* presents an annual index of gender equality in the law in 190 economies. Data is collected through survey responses from local legal experts. The final dataset identifies barriers to women's economic participation and encourages the reform of discriminatory laws. As such, the new questions are designed to collect additional data on the measures that governments are implementing to address any challenges faced by women employees and entrepreneurs during the pandemic. The analysis of the data collected will include information on both temporary and permanent measures related to employment regulation, social protection and benefits, and childcare, as well as measures affecting access to the justice system, courts, and services protecting women from violence. The following paragraphs provide more detail on the research questions added by survey.

Labor Questionnaire

As the spread of COVID-19 causes the widespread closure of businesses, schools, and care centers, the effects of gender discrimination at work become more pronounced. Worldwide, women perform the most unpaid care work. Women are also at greater risk of losing employment due to a pandemic, as they make up a majority of the low-wage workforce. Wage gaps will also be exacerbated during this time: when women earn less, they are less protected during economic crises.

The *Women, Business and the Law* labor questionnaire will seek to determine whether governments have introduced amendments to labor legislation in response to COVID-19, looking particularly at areas in which women will be most affected. This includes, for example, changes in working hours, hiring rules, and flexible work arrangements. It will also examine whether social protection and unemployment benefits have been increased, with a particular focus on sick leave policies. Other forms of paid leave, including to care for a sick child or spouse, will also be considered.

Family Questionnaire

Dealing with family law matters during a pandemic is certain to bring about unexpected and unprecedented issues. Custody arrangements, financial obligations such as alimony, and court closures amid stay-at-home orders could disproportionately affect women. In such cases, justice systems may consider implementing innovative methods of serving their constituents while maintaining safety as a priority.

The *Women, Business and the Law* family questionnaire focuses on this aspect by adding questions on the responses of family justice systems to address demands from women during the COVID-19 crisis, including when seeking a divorce or to speed up a pending child custody case. It also asks whether family courts have allowed for remote access, such as electronic filing of claims and hearings by phone or videoconference, where possible.

Violence against Women Questionnaire

Pandemics can both incite and exacerbate violence against women. Economic insecurity, social isolation, and reduced health service availability are all contributing factors to an increase in violence during outbreaks like COVID-19. At such time, alternative responses to violence against women and the continuing availability of services, including emergency services, are critical.

The *Women, Business and the Law* violence against women questionnaire aims to gather data on the services available to victims of violence in the 190 economies covered. Services including healthcare units, legal aid, shelters, dedicated police stations, and hotlines will be measured, including any exceptional services made available during the pandemic. The questionnaire will also seek to examine where economies maintain a publicly available database on court cases, and whether any exceptional measures were taken to enable access to courts in the event of physical closures. Analyzing the cases filed and resolved during this time will give the team a broader understanding of how access to justice was affected by COVID-19, particularly for women victims of violence.

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