



In collaboration with:



Live Learning Experience: *Beyond the immediate response to the outbreak of COVID-19*

Women's leadership: Critical for rethinking the future in the post COVID-19 era

Briefing & Learning Note

May 6th, 2020



For more information, please contact: policy@uclg.org



Launched jointly by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Metropolis, and UN-Habitat on March 25th, 2020, the **#BeyondTheOutbreak** Live Learning Experience (LLE) virtual sessions aim to bring together Local and Regional Governments (LRGs), their associations, and partner organizations to allow and promote meaningful exchange as they find themselves confronting the COVID-19 crisis while maintaining an orderly functioning of public services. This special edition of the LLE, held on Wednesday May 6th, 2020, **in collaboration with UN Women**, explored **how critical women's leadership is for rethinking the future in the post-COVID-19 era**.

The session brought together elected women leaders from Banjul, Barcelona, Bogotá, Dakar, Esplugues de Llobregat, Gaziantep, Iriga, Nizhnekamsk, Nouakchott, Pichincha, Polokwane, Quito, Sala, and Tunis. It also counted with the participation of the president of REFELA (the Network of Locally Elected Women in Africa) in Ghana, the President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), and the President of the 73rd session of the General Assembly of United Nations, as well as key partners from the civil society sector.

Gender Equality & Women's Leadership: A priority for the global constituency of local and regional governments

As identified in the *Manifesto on the Future of Equality: Beyond Beijing+25*, the pursuit of gender equality is not on track. While institutional and policy frameworks have been put in place, their implementation often lags. Violence against women and girls constitutes a grave violation of human rights and remains one of the greatest challenges to achieving gender equality. Women continue to be discriminated in all spheres of society around the world. The status of women is one of 'vulnerability' or 'invisibility' even though they are proactive and effective actresses of transformation. This has been true in regards to all the pressing challenges of our times: from economic development to migrations, from climate change to fair and equal access to basic services, from conflict resolution to the fulfillment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And it is especially becoming visible now, as the world is confronted with the COVID-19 crisis.

To this end, the partnership between local and regional government networks and the United Nations offered a platform, through its Live Learning Experience, to local and regional elected women who are in turn ensuring that the voices of women are represented in the spaces where strategies against the pandemic are decided under a woman's leadership and with a gender approach. Women and girls live the pandemic differently, as do the different territories and localities they inhabit.

The objective of the session was to provide the space for women leaders from across the world to share their key strategies, concerns and experiences, recalling their critical role responding to and managing the crisis. At the same time, the session aimed to provide an opportunity to renew participants' commitment and support to the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment at all levels beyond the outbreak. During the session, speakers pointed out to the position of women as front liners, often overrepresented as





social, health, volunteers and professional caregivers, assuming greater physical and emotional costs and facing an increased risk of infection. The need to ensure that the voice of local and regional governments is heard in the global conversation on gender equality and the empowerment of women in all spheres of life and government was reiterated during the session.

The participants also agreed that special attention needs to be paid to the impact of the pandemic on women and girls and to ensure that their needs and rights are addressed through social policies of a reorganization of time and redistribution of power and wealth. There is a need to undertake reforms tackling the structural and crucial dimension of care – and do so in a manner that truly leaves no one and no territory behind.

In that sense, the LLE posed important yet complex questions, such as what does the pandemic entail in terms of lessons and opportunities regarding women’s participation in policy making? What policy reforms are needed to ensure the needs and rights of women and girls are adequately addressed now and after the pandemic? How are structural inequalities of women and girls – such as their disproportionate burdens of care and time, or less access to economic opportunity – exacerbated by the COVID-19 era? Moreover, the session also invited participants to collectively reflect on the future, asking them how can these structural barriers be addressed by local/regional leaders beyond the outbreak.

Women’s leadership as a keystone in addressing the COVID-19 outbreak and beyond

The session was introduced by Åsa Regnér, Deputy Executive Director of UN Women, who highlighted the importance of involving women in the preparation of crisis response plans at all levels. As women bring different experiences and perspectives, talents, and skills to the table, their contribution is critical for better-informed decisions, more just outcomes, and policies and laws that work for both women and men. Regnér mentioned, in particular, that even though “women’s contributions are essential for economies, they are still paid less than men”. In addition, women do the vast majority of unpaid work, including cleaning, cooking and care for children and elderly.

Maimunah Mohd Sharif, UN-Habitat Executive Director urged all spheres of government and stakeholders to put women and girls at the centre of efforts in the recovery. She argued that women and girls are more at risk in the pandemic, in particular as they will be most affected by the loss of jobs, and called for local and regional leaders to take measures to curb this. “Women need to be at the centre of global decision-making and have a seat at the table. We need to pay special focus to older persons and women and girls living with disability, who can easily be forgotten in the recovery,” she emphasized.

Thembisile Nkadimeng, Mayor of Polokwane and UCLG Co-President, argued for the importance of women’s self-organization in order to better rebuild in the aftermath. She called for national governments to act on gendered inequalities and enhance well-being with universal healthcare and social protection. She also called for the development of an





equality framework in urban planning and legislation to ensure the full inclusion of women and girls in the social fabric of cities and regions. “As identified in our UCLG Decalogue for the Post COVID-19 era, we know well that the sacrifices that we are asking from this and future generations need to lead to more just and equality driven societies where we take care of each other.”

Women leaders’ entry points for providing adequate responses to the COVID-19 crisis

The high-level discussion was opened by Ada Colau, Mayor of Barcelona, and UCLG Special Envoy to the United Nations, who highlighted how the crisis has made it even more important to have responsive **public healthcare systems**. She explained that, in the aftermath, it will be necessary to develop a **new economy** that puts people in the centre that does not speculate with basic needs, adopts premises of the feminist, pacifist, and ecologist movements, and empowers local and regional governments to provide solutions to communities.

Claudia López, Mayor of Bogotá, argued that the recovery phase needs to respond to the deep questions that were being asked before the outbreak. The values of solidarity and empathy are needed, she argued, to respond to this pandemic and those that will come. Pilar Díaz, Mayor of Esplugues de Llobregat, also highlighted the value of care work, and of those people - the great majority of them women- who carry out this work. Putting care in the centre of policies is integral, she argued, for a **people-centred recovery**.

Gender-based violence was a common theme in the conversation. Souad Abderrahim, Mayor of Tunis highlighted how her city works in real-time to protect and support women survivors of violence, even during the pandemic. The Vice Mayor of Quito, Gissela Chalá also called for developing political strategies to eradicate gender-based violence including psychological and patrimonial violence against women.¹ The recovery, she stated, will only come if we reinvent ourselves with a **Right to the City approach**. Carola Gunnarsson, Mayor of Sala and Vice-President of UCLG for Europe, also emphasized that violence towards women and girls could continue being a crisis in the coming months, and called for continuous dedication to gender equality as set in the international human rights framework. She also highlighted how the crisis will affect migrant and refugee families.² Hajjia Mariam, President of REFELA Ghana, called for all spheres of government to pay attention to **vulnerable communities**, addressing in particular children living in the streets in order to truly leave no-one behind.

Rohey Malick Lowe, Mayor of Banjul, highlighted that incorporating gender-sensitive planning of cities means designing for all women, as per the statement of the Executive Director of UN-Habitat. She argued that, in the aftermath, women would need to be in the centre of decision-making since they have been most affected by the crisis and therefore

¹ For more information on the work of LRGs to ensure the safety of vulnerable populations during the confinement period, see the Briefing and Learning Note on Housing, LLE 01/04/20.

² For more information on the work of LRGs to leveraging migrant’s contribution to the emergency and addressing vulnerabilities of this particular population, see the Briefing and Learning Note on Migration, LLE 16/04/20.





have a critical perspective. Fatimetou Abdel Malick, President of Nouakchott Region echoed this sentiment by calling for a balanced **representation of women in decision making processes** at all levels and in all spheres, to protect their interests and respond to their needs.

Madeleine Almelo-Gazman, Mayor of Iriga, UCLG Treasury, said that the crisis presents an opportunity to **promote gender equality** in cities, in the home, and in the workplace. She also argued the only way to overcome the pandemic is by working together, and becoming better citizens to develop a sustainable world. Elvira Dolotkazina, Vice-Mayor of Nizhnekamsk addressed how local and regional governments can support women's needs during the pandemic, describing specific plans from Nizhnekamsk during the outbreak to carry out non-discriminatory employment policies and service provision.³

Paola Pabón, Prefect of the Pichincha region focused on the need to think about food sovereignty and security in the aftermath of the pandemic, calling for the activation of the whole range of popular and solidarity-based economic activities in the aftermath, including **microfinance** for women, small-scale producers and agriculture.⁴ Fatma Şahin, Mayor of Gaziantep, argued that **food security** will be a crucial issue for the future, as will be the need to guarantee healthcare for all populations.

Beyond the outbreak: Inclusive multilateralism and gender equality to advance the 2030 Agenda

Emilia Saiz, UCLG Secretary-General, moderated the discussions arguing that looking into the future, **empowering women and girls** is critical and argued that a different type of partnership between spheres of government and civil society, in particular women's groups, is needed for the aftermath of the crisis. Emilia Saiz also commended the clear call of the local women leaders to ensure that gender equality is at the heart of the recovery plans. Furthermore, it is "critical to commit to the global agendas in the recovery, we cannot allow priorities to shift and consider the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda as accessories," she stated.

Maria Fernanda Espinosa, President of the 73rd United Nations General Assembly echoed this by calling for coordinated global action based on solidarity and cooperation. Co-responsibility among spheres of Government, an **inclusive multilateralism** that considers local governments, and a perspective that considers the 2030 Agenda, she argued, will allow us to develop a new social contract that addresses all inequalities. Gabriela Cuevas, President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), argued that it is key to ensure global agreements become local solutions. She said that the impact of **women's leadership** had been key in the pandemic, in terms of transparency, direct communication on the need to develop inter-governmental dialogues, and being sensitive to different communities.

³ For more information on the work of LRGs to include a gender dimension in their labour policies, public-private partnerships, and fiscal responses, see the Briefing and Learning Note on Local Finances, LLE 23/04/20.

⁴ For more information on the work of LRGs to leverage local economic actors and the solidarity economy for the recovery, see the Briefing and Learning Note on Local Economic Development, LLE 30/04/20.





Prior to ending the session, Shipra Narang Suri, Chief of the Urban Practices Branch of UN-Habitat, reiterated the commitment of UN-Habitat to support gender equality in local governments. The group of participants was invited to reflect, through a Mentimeter exercise, what a Generation Equality Coalition for leadership should strive for. The word cloud resulting from the survey highlighted three key concepts: justice, freedom, and human rights.

The wrap-up of the session was handled by Octavi de la Varga Secretary General of Metropolis, and Ana Falú, UCLG UBUNTU advisor. The Secretary-General of Metropolis **called male leaders to commit to gender equality and to acknowledge the transformational role women perspectives provide.** Ana Falú called for political leadership to generate new links among people and institutions. She argued that women's leadership in national states and provinces, as well as local governments, is essential to this end, and called for a roadmap to think about the post-COVID era in terms of what it means for women, and how to articulate a way forward.

Lessons learned so far: Key messages and ways forward

In the build-up towards this session, UCLG Women leaders agreed on **Call for Action on Women's Leadership for the Post COVID-19** reflecting on the past and present experience of LRGs; highlighting the key role women have played in confronting this pandemic and the different ways in which it is affecting women and girls, reinforcing existing inequalities and vulnerabilities; and identifying key measures and strategies that will be necessary to set the pathway towards Generation Equality, where women's leadership is no longer an exception but the norm.

Gender equality was already being taken up as a priority area for local and regional government networks and their members before the coronavirus crisis hit. In the current context, it remains as relevant as ever. LRGs need to avoid any form of regression and make the connections between the equality of women and men in our societies and the stewardship of our communities and our planet. Instead of seeking to go "back to normal", it is time to be ambitious and see gender equality as an integral part of the solution to the many challenges we face in terms of health, climate, economy, and fundamental human rights.

The already precarious livelihoods of women around the world are now worsening. Gender-based violence against women is increasing, often exacerbated by the precarious housing and confinement conditions, overburdening women with cooking, cleaning and care





responsibilities. And yet; women represent the bulk of the often underpaid and undervalued health and care systems workforce, not to mention at the frontlines of other basic services, such as grocery stores, facing the unprecedented challenges head-on. They are also playing a critical role in neighborhoods' cohesion and solidarity efforts, keeping us together and safe.

Gender equality is not an ideal but a necessity which local and regional elected officials, both women and men, should be committed to defend and promote for the benefit of our democracies and societies for everyone everywhere. It is clear that health emergencies do not impact men and women in the same way and this simple acknowledgment will be critical to overcoming this and future pandemics. Empowered and safer women and children will lead to resilient and safer societies.

Based on the learnings of this pandemic, and the ongoing efforts of the Local and Regional Governments constituency towards gender equality, the UCLG Women leaders called on the local, regional, national, and international institutions to:

- Step forward to ensure that we **take decisive steps to protect and empower women and girls everywhere** from gender-based violence, in particular in relation to domestic violence risk situations.
- **Promote new governance models** that allow for co-creation with all stakeholders and **in particular women's leadership in all sectors of society**. Women must be involved in leading the recovery after COVID-19 and the response to future emergencies.
- **Improve the working conditions of women**, in particular in the care-related jobs which need to guarantee inclusion and hold our society together.
- **Involve women in COVID-19 specialized groups or task forces**, as well as in legislative, policy, and budgetary decision-making processes.
- **Foster gender-sensitive universal health care, research, and local service provision** to overcome this pandemic and support women and children beyond the outbreak.
- **Provide support for out-of-school children and for children without access to care facilities** and their parents, who are combining home working and childcare—a nearly impossible task that falls disproportionately on women.
- Push for **gender-segregated data** to help visualize women and girls in our societies and territories, and guide public policies.
- **Promote women's and girls' access to information, knowledge and technologies**, ensuring the fulfilment of their digital rights.⁵
- **Put gender equality policies at the forefront of the recovery plans** by reinforcing mainstreaming and existing gender-sensitive policies.

They further called men, in particular colleagues in local and regional governments all over the world, to join the efforts in making the above call a reality and share the quest for gender equality.

⁵ For more information on the work of LRGs on a human-rights based approach to digitalization during and beyond the crisis, see the Briefing and Learning Note on Digital Technologies, LLE 15/04/20





The session reiterated the commitment of LRGs' equality-driven movement to working with the UN System, national governments, the international community, women groups and grassroots organizations, civil society and all stakeholders in taking decisive steps towards Generation Equality and building back better.

Resources

The **Call for Action on Women's Leadership for the Post COVID-19** era is available here in [English](#) / [Español](#) / [Français](#). Other Live Learning Experiences briefings and presentations can be found [here](#). The [Cities for Global Health platform](#), facilitated by Metropolis, is a living repository of LRGs' initiatives to confront the COVID-19 crisis, including from a gender perspective. For further information, please refer to the related resources shared during the session and included below.

- UCLG Decalogue for the COVID-19 Aftermath - [English](#) / [Español](#) / [Français](#)
- UN-Women: Gender equality matters in COVID-19 response - [English](#) / [Español](#) / [Français](#)
- Cities Alliance: How COVID-19 can unveil women's potential and needs in cities - [English](#)
- CEMR and Urbact: Gender Equal Cities under COVID 19 - [English](#)
- UCLG Manifesto on the Future of Equality: Beyond Beijing+25 - [English](#) / [Español](#) / [Français](#)
- UCLG Standing Committee on Gender Equality (UCLG Women) - [English](#)
- REFELA: Network of Local Elected Women of Africa - [English](#) / [Français](#)
- UN-Women – Generation Equality: Realizing women's rights for an equal future – [English](#) / [Español](#) / [Français](#)

