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Security Nexus Perspectives

## HOW TO IMPROVE SECURITY OUTCOMES DURING A PANDEMIC? START WITH A GENDER LENS

By Sharon Gouveia Feist and Monica S. Herrera \*

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the measures governments are willing to take to safeguard the security of their citizens. Actions previously considered unthinkable: shuttering restaurants and places of social gathering, closing borders, and shelter-in-place orders, have been implemented in order to save lives and limit the spread of the disease. But whose security is actually being safeguarded? Whose needs and interests are being heard and prioritized? Whose are being overlooked? And what does this mean for the enduring security of states? To answer these questions, one must consider security through a gender lens.

Applying a gender perspective to COVID-19 means understanding that men, women, boys, and girls experience crisis in fundamentally different ways, and that response efforts also have significant gender-differentiated impacts. Unfortunately, despite [lessons learned from previous disease outbreaks](#) and the extreme measures already undertaken to address this pandemic, the global response to COVID-19 is [still falling short](#) when it comes to implementing a gender perspective, to include an [urgent need to incorporate gender analyses](#) into response planning. For many, particularly women, the ability of governments and policy-makers to apply a gender lens to this crisis is fundamental to their physical security. And as states consider how to improve long-term security outcomes, they should bear in mind that there may be [no better predictor of state security than the security of women](#).

While the dynamics of global pandemics have differed over time, there has always been a consistent intersection with vulnerable populations. National and global fear and uncertainty over a pandemic provides an enabling environment for exploitation, violence, and risky survival strategies and behaviors. COVID-19 is proving no different, and some of the life-saving responses being implemented have also had the unintended consequence of putting women further in harm's way. For instance, shelter-in-place orders have trapped many victims of domestic violence with their abusers, and diverting healthcare resources to treating COVID-19 cases may be resulting in a reduction of services typically available to survivors. For many, these consequences can be a matter of life and death, as the UN reports that globally 50,000 women a year are killed by intimate partners or family members, and in the U.S. half of all female homicide victims are killed by intimate partners. Unfortunately, local and global reporting amid the COVID-19 pandemic

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point toward distinct [increases in gender-based violence \(GBV\)](#) against women and girls, as well as increased risks of [sex](#) and [cybersex trafficking](#).

[According to UN Women](#), France has reported a 30% increase of domestic violence cases since their lockdown on March 17; Argentina has received a 25% increase in domestic violence calls to emergency centers since their lockdown on March 20; Cyprus and Singapore helplines have registered an increase of 30% and 33% calls, respectively; and increased cases of domestic violence, as well as demand for emergency shelters, have been reported by Canada, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Here in Hawai'i, in response to increased multi-island reporting that landlords are pressuring women for sex in exchange for rent, the State Commission on the Status of Women published [guidance and resources](#) for women being exploited by their landlords during this COVID-19 crisis. Every day, physical security is threatened as a direct result of this pandemic. This is addition to other security concerns women uniquely face, such as, economic insecurity as the lower paid workers; family and household insecurity as primary caregivers for the elderly, sick, and out of school youth; and health security as the world increasingly relies upon women serving on the front lines as pandemic responders – over [70% of the healthcare workers are female](#).

Nations must immediately prioritize women's physical security. Some are already at the forefront in quickly implementing protective measures – [France's Gender Equality Minister recently announced](#) that their government “would pay for up to 20,000 nights of accommodation in hotels to help women escape abusive partners, and had set up 20 support centers at shopping centers around the country where women could seek help.” These security measures are immediately life-saving, and as such, governments must classify the protection of women and girls as an essential service that includes providing access to relief and resources like helplines and shelters. These issues cannot be viewed as an afterthought or treated as a second or third order effect of a crisis like this; they must be seen as inherent to and on equal par with the crisis itself.

This article highlights some of the unique vulnerabilities women and girls face during crises and the importance of ensuring they are protected and have safe access to relief and recovery assistance. But women also play active and vital roles both during and post-crisis, and their full and equal participation in the security sector is a prerequisite to achieving long-term security outcomes. This article is therefore just the start of the conversation and the first in a *Women, Peace & Security (WPS)* series led by the Sharon Gouveia Feist and Monica S. Herrera.

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