

Equality Programming in COVID-19 response

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WHATEVER
IT TAKES

Like all crises, the COVID-19 outbreak is likely to affect people differently based on their sex, age, disability and other factors. Marginalised groups such as women, elderly, adolescents, youth, children, persons with disabilities, refugees, migrants and minorities become even more vulnerable during emergencies. Emergencies have a tendency to exacerbate existing gender inequalities, and the incidence of sexual and gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against women and children is likely to increase. At a minimum gender, age and disability sensitive programming must be integrated throughout every sector response. This document outlines cross-sectoral gender, age and disability programming guidance.

Integrating equality into preparedness and response

Assessment

- Conduct a **gender, age and disability analysis** to identify inequalities, gaps and capacities and the specific impacts of the crisis on women, girls, men and boys and people living with disabilities (PWD) to inform the priorities of the preparedness and response plans. This should ideally be based on existing sources of data and should avoid data collection with beneficiaries.
- Consider how the quarantine experience can be different for women and men, girls and boys (increased household and caring responsibilities, increased risk of conflict and violence, unmet reproductive and maternal health needs, the pressure of having to provide for the family), but also persons living with a disability and the elderly (access to information, services and resources), and whether these different physical, cultural, security, and sanitary needs are being met.
- Consult **women and girls**, women's groups and organisations, health care workers, women leaders from the community and organisations of **persons with disabilities** in all data and information gathering, from needs assessments to targeting, monitoring and evaluation in a safe and culturally appropriate modality.
- **Disaggregate data** collected throughout the response by all actors by sex, age, and disability, to produce the evidence base for monitoring equality-related impacts.
- Include **gender-focused indicators** in all M&E frameworks.

Response

- Involve women, adolescent girls, disabled persons and other at risk groups in the design and delivery of the programme to ensure their specific needs are understood and addressed in the response. Do this through small groups with physical distancing in place where possible, otherwise with existing programme participants or women's organisations via phone.
- Develop and implement **social mobilisation and community engagement** in conjunction with representatives of most marginalised groups, including women and youth groups, female community health workers, traditional birth attendants, traditional female healers, disabled persons and women from indigenous and most marginalised groups.
- Factor in gender-based differences, such as literacy levels and access to information tools, such as mobile phones and internet. Ensure that **communication** is inclusive and transmitted through multiple media options including radio, visual guides, and various existing community channels. Use appropriate languages, accessible formats, such as large print or pictures, and with use of accessible technologies, eg SMS. Promote means for trusted women to transmit messages to other women.
- Design interventions and messaging that are at minimum gender sensitive (informed by an understanding of the differences, inequalities and different needs of females and males), and gender transformative where possible (that recognise and redistribute the unpaid care and household responsibilities assigned to women

and girls and contribute to eliminate discriminatory practices). Do not reinforce or perpetuate harmful gender norms, discriminatory practices, stigma and inequalities. See Annex for specific examples of **gender sensitive/transformational messaging**.

- Provide [specific advice](#) for people - usually women - who care for children, the elderly and other vulnerable groups in quarantine, and who may not be able to avoid close contact.
- Continuously **monitor** and identify when a particular group is failing to access services, such as the elderly and people with disabilities or other group who may face a higher risk of exclusion and marginalisation during pandemics. Find out why this is and adjust programming as required.
- Continue to give priority to **sexual and reproductive health** and rights during COVID-19, given these issues can be severely impacted during outbreaks, including by adhering to strict guidance for infection prevention for safe pregnancies and childbirth.
- Address the needs of women on the frontline of the pandemic: provide psychosocial support through Ministry of Health, external specialists or qualified internal staff and consider their menstrual hygiene needs.

Gender Based Violence

- Update **GBV service mapping and referral pathways** to reflect primary and secondary health care facilities. Inform key communities and service providers about the increased risk of violence against women and girls and the updated pathways through existing groups and channels, eg Care Groups, where these are still operational, as well as other media channels. Ensure services are accessible to women and girls with disabilities.
- Develop content to add to **Engaging Men/Couples dialogue** sessions to discuss GBV, the impact of lockdown on households and ways to mitigate violence. Implement with Engaging Men/Couples dialogue groups as soon as possible (before or after lockdown period).
- **Develop messaging** on stress/anger management, prevention of GBV and referral pathways through IEC materials and local radio.
- Using external specialists or qualified internal staff, conduct (remote) trainings for staff on the [GBV Pocket Guide](#) for how to handle disclosures of GBV, including linking people to GBV referral services.
- Coordinate with Ministry of Health/Gender (as appropriate) and use Ministry staff, external specialists or qualified internal staff to **train health workers** on how to handle disclosures of GBV and make onward referrals. Ensure relevant resources for GBV and health responders are available.
- Adopt a **do-no-harm** and leave no one behind approach in all needs assessments, targeting, response plans and implementation and prioritise the mitigation, response and prevention of GBV and Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA). Ensure that GBV risk-mitigation measures are in place in quarantine facilities and evacuation processes and that the protection needs of women and girls must be at the centre of response efforts.

For **sectoral guidance** on gender, please refer to Concern's *Programme Guidance for COVID-19* document and the [IASC Gender Alert for COVID-19 Outbreak Gender Alert](#).

References

[GENDER ALERT FOR COVID-19 OUTBREAK](#) / [UNFPA Technical Brief: COVID-19: A Gender Lens](#) / [COVID-19: How to include marginalized and vulnerable people in risk communication and community engagement](#)



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Annex: Gender sensitive/transformational messaging for COVID-19

In addition to each country's national or cluster level messaging, below are some examples of messaging that can be adapted to context, audience and mode of communication:

Gender Roles

- Wash your hands and your children's hands regularly and follow the guidance (see image, right). Remember that washing your children's hands is the responsibility of both parents - *mothers and fathers!*
- Washing hands more regularly means collecting more water for the family. This means extra work and also extra risk of violence for women and girls who collect it, especially if they go alone. Support each other by sharing this task between family members and helping each other (remember to maintain physical distancing during water collection).
- Women, men and children will need to go to the health centre for many reasons (pregnancy, HIV, TB, malaria, malnutrition, vaccinations etc). Looking after the children and the elderly at home needs to be a team effort by women *and* men. When men help women with essential tasks like these, their families will stay healthier.
- If food is scarce, the whole family needs to eat nutritious food to keep them strong and healthy, including women. Don't let women go without in difficult times.
- When children are out of school, girls are often given more household chores to do. Encourage both boys and girls to help out with household chores – the more everyone contributes, the healthier the family will be. Make sure that both girls and boys have adequate time to study when they are at home.



Anger/Stress Management

For adults:

- This is a stressful time for everyone. It's completely ok and normal¹:
 - To feel powerless, insecure and as if you're not in control.
 - To be afraid of the virus.
 - To feel crowded at home – or to feel isolated and have a hard time without social contacts and intimate relationships.
 - To worry about your health, family or financial future.

All this is stressful and limits your ability to take care of yourself and empathise with others. Being stressed out restricts ones' views and feelings. It is tempting to look to others for blame. But these emotions are no reason or excuse for taking your frustrations out on others. You remain responsible for your reaction to feeling overwhelmed, insecure or angry. Violence is never a solution. Find ways to deal with stress without conflict or violence:

- Be aware of your warning sign, such as cursing, shaking, sweating, screaming, etc. Take them seriously. You need to act now. Important: When you notice warning signs, inform you partner that you need to have a moment to yourself.
- BEFORE you react, especially when you are frustrated or angry. STOP; BREATHE; THINK. To calm down, walk away and count to 10, breathe deeply, walk around or do a physical activity. This will "cool your head" and clarify your ideas. It is also important that people who are angry share their feelings with the other person involved. For example, they can say, "I am very angry right now and I need to leave. I need to do something now, like go for a walk, so I can release my anger. When I cool down and feel calm, I'd like to talk to resolve this – then it becomes easier to express yourself in a calm and peaceful way."²

¹ [Corona Crisis: Survival Kit for Men under pressure](#), MenCare Switzerland

² [Breaking the Barriers Facilitator's Manual](#)

- Drugs and alcohol are a risk. If you use them, limit yourself, otherwise you will increase your chances of losing control.
- **(Within the national pandemic response guidelines)** Strive to maintain social networks through talking to friends or neighbours whenever possible. When doing so, maintain the recommended physical distance and follow the national guidelines.
- Respond to children’s reactions, both girls and boys, in a supportive way and explain to them that they are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. If your boys and girls show emotions and are sad, treat them both in a comforting way, give them affection, reassure them they’re safe and praise them frequently. If possible, create opportunities for children to play and relax. Provide age-appropriate facts about what is happening and give them clear examples on what they can do to help protect themselves and others from infection. Share information about what could happen in a reassuring way.³
- See WHO’s one-page tips for positive parenting [here](#).

For children:

- Children may respond to stress in different ways. In a situation like this it is normal to feel sad, worried, confused, scared or angry. Know that you are not alone and talk to someone you trust, like your parent or teacher so that you can help keep yourself safe and healthy.

GBV

- If you hear violent conflict in your neighbours’ homes, speak out. If it is safe for you, find a way to approach them and support them to resolve conflict or refer to someone else who can help them, e.g. community or religious leaders, or other persons of authority in your community.
- If you know women who are experiencing violence in their homes, tell them that they can seek help at the health facility or GBV referral services (*complete with context-specific details*).

Positive Discipline

- Children can be disciplined positively and without violence at all times. With the additional stresses and uncertainties at this time, it is especially important that children do not bear the brunt of this stress through violence. Positive discipline will help children to manage this period better and will improve relationships and communications between parents and children. Here is a guide to positive parenting⁴:
 1. **Fix-up:** When children cause trouble or hurt another child, expect them to help fix it - or at least try to help. If they break a toy, ask them to help you fix it. If they make a child cry, have them help with the soothing. If they throw toys around, ask them to put them away.
 2. **Ignore:** The best way to deal with bad behaviour aimed at getting your attention is to simply ignore it. But make sure you give your attention to your children when they behave well. Children need attention for good behaviour, not bad behaviour.
 3. **Be firm:** Clearly and firmly state, or even demand that the child does what needs to be done. Speak in a tone that lets your child know that you mean what you say and that you expect the child to do as s/he is told. Being firm does not mean yelling, nagging, threatening, reasoning, or taking away privileges. Keep suggestions to a minimum, and always speak kindly, even when speaking firmly.
 4. **Stay in Control:** Act before the situation gets out of control -- before you get angry and overly frustrated and before the child's behaviour becomes unreasonable.
 5. **Separation:** When children irritate one another, fight, squabble, hit or kick, have them rest or play apart for a time. Being apart for a while lets each child calm down. Then you can use other ways to encourage better behaviour.
 6. **Behaviour Management:** Talk with children calmly to learn what caused a disagreement. Then talk about ways to deal with it. Come to a solution that is agreeable to both you and the children. This helps children learn to be responsible for their behaviour.

³ [Briefing note on addressing mental health and psychosocial aspects of COVID-19 Outbreak- Version 1.1](#)

[Inter](#) (IASC)

⁴ [Breaking the Barriers Facilitator’s Manual](#)

7. **Redirection:** When children become too rough, stop them, explain why you are stopping them, and suggest another activity. When they knock over liquid, give them a cloth and a pail of water to clean up the mess. When they race dangerously indoors, if possible, take them outside for a game of chase. When they throw things at each other, gather them for a story time or organise a game.
8. **Praise:** Give more attention and praise for good behaviour and less for naughty behaviour. Don't make punishment a reward. Let the child know that you appreciate a good attitude and cooperation. Children respond positively to genuine respect and praise.

Cooperation within Households

- Today more than ever, families are called upon to be more socially cohesive, to communicate non-violently and to manage household resources in a concerted manner. Decisions on the allocation of resources, the equal sharing of responsibilities between husbands and wives, the involvement of children (boys and girls) in tasks appropriate for their age will help us to face this danger that threatens us all. More than ever, everyone must learn and practice the rules of hygiene and take measures to protect those who are particularly threatened by the symptoms of this virus: the elderly, people living with disabilities, people with underlying diseases.

Sexual and Reproductive Health

- We know from previous disease outbreaks that when schools close, there is a greater risk of unwanted adolescent pregnancies.
 - **For adolescents:** Schools are closed and you have more free time but if you are sexually active:
 - You are your safest sex partner. Masturbation will not spread COVID-19, especially if you wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before and after sex.
 - The next safest partner is a partner that you live with. Having close contact — including sex — with only a small circle of people helps prevent spreading COVID-19. Have sex only with consenting partners.
 - You should avoid close contact — including sex — with anyone outside your household. If you do have sex with others, have as few partners as possible.
 - Kissing can easily pass COVID-19. Avoid kissing anyone who is not part of your small circle of close contacts.
 - If you do have sex:
 - Use contraception – condoms, pills, injections etc, wherever possible
 - Wash hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before and after sex.
 - Avoid sex, especially kissing, if you or a partner have the symptoms of COVID-19.⁵
 - **For parents:** It may feel uncomfortable but now is more important than ever to talk to them about sex and the risk of unwanted pregnancy. Encourage them to use contraceptives if they are sexually active. Don't ignore this topic or get angry with them about it – rather encourage them to talk to you about their concerns and help them find solutions.
- There may be fear around going to health centres during this time. However:
 - It is important that women continue to attend their antenatal services, that they deliver at a health facility and they attend post-natal services so that their health and the health of their baby does not suffer as a consequence. Communicate with your midwife, health worker or health facility manager if you have any questions or concerns. If you have a mobile, call them.
 - It is important that women and men continue to take their children for routine vaccinations so that their children do not suffer from preventable diseases.
 - Women, men and children with HIV, malaria, tuberculosis or malnutrition must continue seeking regular treatment.
 - It is important that women and girls who experience sexual violence seek timely treatment to prevent pregnancy, STI and HIV infection within 72 hours of the incident.
 - Follow your national or district level Ministry of Health/national WHO advice/Community Health Worker or Midwife's advice (*contextualise as appropriate*) to know any changes to the normal schedule that can facilitate physical distancing at health facilities.

⁵ [Sex and Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)

Early Marriage

- These are difficult times – but if you are thinking of arranging an early marriage for your daughter, think about how this will negatively impact your daughter’s life, her education, health and economic wellbeing in the future.

Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

- This may be a time of great pressure for families to earn income in any way they can. Women and children and people with disabilities will be more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse. It is important that women and children know this is wrong and know where to go for support.
- In these hard times, it may be necessary for women to spend more time seeking food, collecting fuel and water. Remember that the further they go, the more dangerous it can be for them, especially if they go alone. Make sure everyone in your family is protected, you only go to places that are safe for you to be, and if you someone needs to go a place that is unknown to them or unsafe, make sure they do not travel on their own. Men in the family should support women so that everyone can feel safe!
- Talk to your children about the risk of someone trying to take advantage of them, especially if their parents are not around. Tell them that if someone tries to touch them or do something inappropriate, they should run away from that person, or scream if it is not possible to run. They should come to you immediately and tell you what happened. As an adult, believe what your child tells you, because children very rarely lie about abuse.
- Remember that many services provided by government and NGOs are free of charge, unless stated otherwise on official documents (*must be contextualised by country*). To access their services, you do NOT need to render any additional fees or favours. This is important to know, because sometimes in times of hardship people in positions of authority might try to take an advantage of the situation. Sexual harassment and abuse of women and children is unfortunately common. Be on the lookout for such situations and whenever you hear or experience such situation, speak up! You can use Concern’s or other service providers’ complaints systems, speak to the supervisor of the person who tried to abuse you or others, alert your local protection committee etc.

Stigma

Use facts and figures to remind people, men, women, boys and girls, to be considerate of one another. Discuss the different reactions they may experience and encourage them to express and communicate their feelings. Men may be more comfortable talking with other men.

- Don’t stigmatize your peers, family, neighbours or tease anyone about being sick; remember that the virus doesn’t follow geographical boundaries, ethnicities, age or ability or gender.
- Refer to [Avoiding Social Stigma Dos and DON’Ts](#) for guidance on language.