

May 1, 2020

The Honorable Mr. John Barsa  
Acting Administrator  
U.S. Agency for International Development  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Acting Administrator Barsa,

We, the undersigned, believe that U.S. Government (USG) investments in gender equality are critical to achieving U.S. foreign policy objectives, strengthening our national security, promoting health and wellbeing, and increasing economic opportunities both abroad and at home.<sup>i</sup> The current COVID-19 global pandemic heightens the urgency of ensuring that gender equality is at the heart of all USG foreign policy and assistance efforts.

Evidence has shown that regardless of the source of the emergency, crises like COVID-19 expose and exacerbate existing inequalities that result in women, girls, and people of diverse gender identities facing disproportionate negative impacts. Women and girls are already experiencing increased incidents of gender-based violence; disruptions in access to essential services such as sexual and reproductive health services and information; shrinking access to decision-making and policy spaces; disruptions to education and learning opportunities; and loss of ability to engage in income-generating and other economic activities.

For example, prior to COVID-19 women and girls perform 76.2% of all unpaid care work,<sup>ii</sup> creating time deficits and limiting access to economic opportunities, public decision-making spaces, and education. The COVID-19 pandemic is increasing these burdens as children are out of school across the globe, and family members become sick and require additional care.<sup>iii</sup>

Gender-based violence, a pandemic before the COVID-19 crisis with an estimated 1 in 3 women and girls experiencing physical or sexual violence in their lifetimes,<sup>iv</sup> is already spiking, as evidenced by drastic increases in reporting rates. Domestic violence rates in particular are rising at rapid pace as women and girls are limited to their homes with abusers and limited access to external support services or mechanisms.<sup>v</sup> With school closures, adolescent girls are at greater risk of sexual exploitation and abuse as well as adolescent pregnancy and child marriage.<sup>vi</sup> They also are less likely to return to school once their education has been disrupted.

Further, pre-existing barriers to essential health services are exacerbated as overwhelmed health systems shift their attention solely to COVID-19 response. Experience has shown us that access to sexual and reproductive health care are critical in a pandemic.<sup>vii</sup> In Sierra Leone, reduced access to reproductive healthcare is estimated to have caused at least as many deaths as Ebola itself.<sup>viii</sup> Research shows that following political, social and economic shocks, at a time when their voice and perspectives are most needed to ensure effective and sustainable responses, women's leadership in the public decision-making that affects their lives is likely to fall significantly. The immediate and long-term consequences of COVID-19 on women and girls will reverse decades of progress on gender equality and related development outcomes, including negative impacts on women's and girls' education, health, economic empowerment, and inclusive political participation, while simultaneously weakening community- and national- level resilience and self-reliance efforts.

We urge USAID to take a holistic evidence-based and data driven approach and take all necessary steps to ensure that the disproportionate impacts faced by women and girls, due to underlying gender inequality and discrimination, are identified and prioritized in containment, response and recovery efforts.

We urge you to consider taking the following essential actions in your capacity as Acting Administrator:

1. Mandate both immediate and ongoing **consultation with gender technical experts** not only within the E3 bureau, but also the thematic and regional bureaus to ensure the mainstreaming of a gender lens throughout all of USAID's COVID-19 response efforts;
2. Reinforce within USAID, the essential need for gender-sensitivity within USAID's COVID-19 efforts, and emphasize the importance of **using the forthcoming USAID gender and COVID-19 guide** as a critical reference tool;
3. In using the new expedited hiring authority, highlight the need for **more dedicated gender staff positions** with appropriate expertise within USAID;
4. **Ensure that USAID COVID-19 response is informed by women's and girls' rights organizations** at home and abroad. This should include:
  - Increased procurements with flexible funding to support local women's rights organizations in order to address the gendered impacts and risks facing women and girls;
  - Simplified proposal processes and requirements to allow for accelerated timelines and to create more space for local women's organization and others to apply;
  - Technical and funding support to local women's rights organizations to collect and utilize good data;
  - Use of innovative solutions and technologies to ensure that women's and girls' safe and meaningful participation in all COVID-19 decision-making does not fall below pre-COVID-19 levels, given the likelihood of significant reversals in the rights and participation of women and girls;
5. **Name a gender technical expert to the USAID COVID-19 Task Force** to facilitate gender mainstreaming across the Task Force's work;
6. Prioritize and support the systematic collection, analysis and use of **data disaggregated by sex and age at minimum**, and ideally disaggregated further to ensure that other identity factors that drive inequalities and can exacerbate needs are surfaced and responded to;
7. **Ensure all global response and recovery efforts are informed by a gender analysis**, and comply with the gender analysis and gender equality and female empowerment integration requirement of the Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act (Section 3(c)).

There is an urgent need for U.S. Government collaboration and leadership on gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment. **The time has never been more critical to ensure that gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment is truly at the heart of the U.S. Government's humanitarian and development assistance efforts across the globe.**

We sincerely thank you for your attention to the above requests and remain ready and willing to serve as a resource in ongoing COVID-19 response and recovery efforts however may be most helpful.

Warm regards,

ACDI/VOCA

Alliance for Peacebuilding

Bread for the World

CARE USA

CHANGE (Center for Health and Gender Equity)

ChildFund International

Church World Service

Clearinghouse on Women's Issues

Council on Gender Equality

FEDA (Femmes et Éducation des Adultes)

FHI 360

Food for the Hungry

Friends of Terre des Hommes

Friends of the Global Fight Against AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria

Futures Without Violence

Generation Guiders

Girl Rising

Girl Up

Global Fund for Children

Global GAIN

Global Health Council

Global Women's Institute

Guttmacher Institute

Heartland Alliance International

Helen Keller International

InterAction  
International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)  
International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN)  
International Rescue Committee  
Ipas  
John Snow, Inc. (JSI)  
Just Like My Child Foundation  
Landesa  
Mercy Corps  
National Cooperative Business Association CLUSA International  
National Democratic Institute  
ONE Campaign  
Oxfam America  
PAI  
PATH  
Pathfinder International  
PCI, a Global Communities Partner  
People Serving Girls At Risk  
Physicians for Peace  
Plan International USA  
Planned Parenthood Federation of America  
Population Media Center  
Prevention Collaborative  
Promundo-US  
Radiant International  
Refugees International

RTI International

Saferworld

Save the Children

Seeds to Sew International

Shadhika

Solidarity Center

The Hunger Project

Together for Girls

Union for Reform Judaism

United States International Council on Disabilities

Vital Voices Global Partnership

Winrock International

Women for Women International

Women in Global Health

Women Watch Afrika, Inc.

Women's Refugee Commission

CC: Senator James Risch, Chairman, Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Senator Bob Menendez, Ranking Member, Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Senator Lindsey Graham, Chairman, Senate Appropriations Sub-Committee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs

Senator Patrick Leahy, Ranking Member, Senate Appropriations Sub-Committee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs

Congressman Eliot Engel, Chairman, House Foreign Affairs Committee

Congressman Michael McCaul, Ranking Member, House Foreign Affairs Committee

Congresswoman Nita M. Lowey, Chairwoman, House Appropriations Sub-Committee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs

Congressman Hal Rogers, Ranking Member, House Appropriations Sub-Committee on State,

## Foreign Operations and Related Programs

Michelle Bekkering, Assistant Administrator, Bureau for Economic Growth, Education, and Environment, USAID

Julie Cram, Deputy Assistant Administrator, Bureau for Economic Growth, Education, and Environment, and Senior Coordinator for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, USAID

Jim Richardson, Director, U.S. Office of Foreign Assistance, Department of State Kelley E. Currie,

Ambassador-At-Large for Global Women's Issues, Office of Global Women's Issue, Department of State

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<sup>i</sup> Joint Strategic Plan (FY2018-2022), p 23; National Security Strategy (2017), p. 42

<sup>ii</sup> ILO, 2018, [https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS\\_633284/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_633284/lang--en/index.htm)

<sup>iii</sup> CARE and IRC, COVID-19 Rapid Gender Analysis, March 31, 2020-

<https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/4676/globalrgacovidrdm33120final.pdf>; Coalition for Women's Economic Empowerment and Equality (CWEEE), April 2020, <https://www.icrw.org/publications/covid-19-and-womens-economic-empowerment-cweee/>

<sup>iv</sup> United Nations, November 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/11/1052041>

<sup>v</sup> United Nations, April 2020,

[https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy\\_brief\\_on\\_covid\\_impact\\_on\\_women\\_9\\_apr\\_2020\\_updated.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_women_9_apr_2020_updated.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> Save the Children, April 2020, <https://www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/usa/reports/health/adolescent-girls-and-gbv-covid-fact-sheet.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> UNFPA, COVID-19: A Gender Lens, March 2020, [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19\\_A\\_Gender\\_Lens\\_Guidance\\_Note.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_A_Gender_Lens_Guidance_Note.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29149310>