Off the back burner: diverse and gender-inclusive decision-making for COVID-19 response and recovery

Sulzhan Bali, Roopa Dhatt, Arush Lal, Amina Jama, Kim Van Daalen, Devi Sridhar, Gender and COVID-19 Working Group

Epidemics function as a gendered vulnerability, and yet gender remains an afterthought in health security and pandemic response, including to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Emerging data indicate that COVID-19 mortality is greater among men, but past experiences suggest that the socioeconomic impact of epidemics tends to be far greater for women. As a result, it is essential to assess the intersectional and gendered vulnerabilities in health emergencies. In addition, given the gender-skewed landscape of power and decision-making in global health, it is also critical to outline women’s leadership and role in such contexts.

Women are users of health services, and they are agents of change in health, making critical contributions as parents, front-line responders, health promoters, influencers, researchers, scientists and decision-makers. In China’s COVID-19 response, female nurses and community health workers were the first line of defence against the outbreak. Despite their major role, an interplay of power and privilege often results in women—particularly women from minority ethnic groups—being under-represented in health and humanitarian leadership, even when women and such minorities are disproportionately affected. This is similarly the case for women from other under-represented groups such as indigenous people, in low and middle-income countries (LMIC) and sexual minorities or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) individuals.

Regardless of constituting over 70% of the global health workforce, women hold only 25% of leadership roles in health. Further, women’s scientific expertise is often excluded in the public realm even though they are more engaged in science outreach. The imbalance in diversity and equity, at the intersection of gender and LMIC representation, is also mirrored in publications and editorial boards of major global health journals. A recent breakdown of WHO Expert Advisory Panels shows that only 34% of members were women and only 11% of members were from the African region, compared with 29% of members from the European region. These patterns of inequality in decision-making are then reflected in who sets the research priorities that inform policy, and who makes the policy decisions in COVID-19 response and recovery.

The lack of representation in agenda setting and decision-making matters because women face a triple burden in pandemics—high risk of exposure to nosocomial infections in their role as healthcare workers; lost opportunities due to school closures and increased unpaid family care; and heightened risk of ill health due to diverted resources and the cascading...
Figure 1  How greater gender representation and diversity in decision-making strengthens COVID-19 and other epidemic responses. GBV, Gender-Based Violence.
groups, indigenous people and the LGBTQI community, will limit group-think, boost problem solving, accountability and learning to unleash overlooked and innovative context-appropriate solutions to global challenges.

The same people who are engaged in response today will be the ones leading recovery and preparedness efforts tomorrow. Measures to promote gender equity, and representation in decision-making at all levels such as those proposed in the ‘COVID 50/50 Five Asks for Gender-Responsive Health Security’ will strengthen both global and local COVID-19 efforts and ensure greater engagement of those who are most affected in planning of response and recovery. In addition, mainstreaming gender in data collection and policy instruments such as the Joint External Evaluations and greater inclusion of women—particularly women from LMICs—in decision-making at the global level and in public discourse will ensure that we reap the innovation and knowledge dividends through smarter and creative decision-making for an effective COVID-19 response and a resilient post-COVID-19 future (see figure 1).

**Acknowledgements** The authors are grateful to Marie Prevot for her help with the graphic design and to Katie Gorham, Bonnie Jenkins, Laura Jung, Ann Keeling, Alexandra Phelan, Sarah Hillware and the Gender and COVID-19 Working Group for their initial thoughts and inputs.

**Collaborators** The Gender and COVID-19 Working Group is a network of interdisciplinary stakeholders interested in advancing research and practice related to COVID-19 coordinated by Clare Wemhem (London School of Economics), Rosemary Morgan (John Hopkins University) and Julia Smith (Simon Fraser University). Other members include: Arne Ruckert (University of Ottawa), Sabra Klein (John Hopkins University), Madeline Johnson and Chris Berzins (Global Affairs Canada), Sulzhan Bali (Women in Global Health), Karen Gropin (University of Hong Kong), Susan Mackay (GAVI), Denise Napier Pimenta (Osvaldo Cruz Foundation), Niayat Shah (USAID), Kelly Thompson (independent consultant), Sabine Gertelt-Pgrigone (Radboud University), Amber Peterman (University of North Carolina and UNICEF Innocenti), Ruth Kutalek (Medizinischen Universität Wien), Sophie Harman (OMUL), Ilana Lowy (French National Centre for Scientific Research), Nazene Danji (UN Women), Ann Keeling (Women in Global Health), Kate Hawkins (Pamoa Communications), Myra Betron (Jhpiego), Susan Bell (Drexel University), Manasee Mishra (IIHMR University, India), Sean Hillier (York University), Evelyne Bischof (Shanghai University of Medicine and Health Sciences, Federico II University, Napoli, Italy, and Women’s Brain Project). More members have joined since this piece was written.

**Contributors** SB and RD conceptualised the piece. AL, AJ, KVD, RD and DS provided critical inputs. SB, AL and KVD created the figure. SB wrote the first draft and consolidated inputs from coauthors.

**Funding** The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

**Disclaimer** The views expressed in this article are those of the authors alone and do not represent the policies or views of the affiliated institutions.

**Competing interests** None declared.

**Patient consent for publication** Not required.

**Provenance and peer review** Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

**Data availability statement** Data are available upon request.

**Open access** This is an open access article distributed in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Unported (CC BY 4.0) license, which permits others to copy, redistribute, remix, transform and build upon this work for any purpose, provided the original work is properly cited, a link to the licence is given, and indication of whether changes were made. See: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

**ORCID iD** Sulzhan Bali http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1146-9512

**REFERENCES**

1. Whentham C, Smith J, Morgan R, et al. COVID-19: the gendered impacts of the outbreak. *Lancet* 2020;395:846–8.

2. Boniol M, McIsaac M, Xu L, et al. Gender equity in the health workforce: analysis of 104 countries. World Health Organization, 2019.

3. McCullagh EA, Nowak K, Pogoriler A, et al. Request a woman scientist: a database for diversifying the public face of science. *PloS Biol* 2019;17:e3000212.

4. Nafade V, Sen R, Pai M. Global health journals need to address equity, diversity and inclusion. *BMJ Glob Health* 2019;4:e002018.

5. Bhauamik S, Jagoor J. Diversity in the editorial boards of global health journals. *BMJ Glob Health* 2019;4:e001909.

6. WHO. Who expert Advisory panels and committees, 2018. Available: https://www.who.int/about/collaborations/expert_panels/en/

7. UN Women. Transforming economies, Realizing rights: progress of the world’s women 2015-2016, 2015.

8. Bali S, Stewart KA, Pate MA. Long shadow of fear in an epidemic: feconomic effects of Ebola on the private sector in Nigeria. *BMJ Glob Health* 2016;1:e000111.

9. Enarson E, Fothergill A, Peek L. Gender and disaster: foundations and new directions for research and practice. Springer: Handbook of disaster research, 2018: 205–23.

10. Valerie S. 1.5 billion children around globe affected by school closure. Washington Post, 2020.

11. O'Reilly M, AO S, Paffenholtz T. Reimagining peacemaking: Women’s roles in peace processes. New York: International Peace Institute, 2015: 31.

12. Cumming D, Leung TY, Rui O. Gender diversity and Securities fraud. *Acad Manage J* 2015;58:1572–93.

13. Cheng JY-J, Groysberg B. Gender diversity at the board level can mean innovation success. . MIT Sloan Management Review, 2020: 61, 1–8.

14. Phillips K, Why diversity makes us smarter. *Sci Am* 2014;311:43–7.

15. Rock D, Grant H. Why diverse teams are smarter. . Harvard Business Review, 2016: 4, 2–5.

16. Larson E. Hacking diversity with inclusive decision making, 2017.

17. Larkin MB. Board gender diversity, corporate reputation and market performance. *Int J Bank Finance* 2020;3:1–26.

18. Dhatt R. Opinion: global health security depends on women, 2020. Available: https://www.devex.com/news/opinion-global-health-security-depends-on-women-96861