

**“Times of Unprecedented Crisis Present Unique Opportunities for Unprecedented Action”  
- Graça Machel, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Dr. Vera Songwe, Maria Ramos**

COVID 19 has unearthed massive inequalities within our societies and brought to glaring light the unique burdens which women carry the world over. As we respond to the impacts of COVID 19 both in the immediate and long term, we have an unprecedented opportunity to completely redesign our ways of living with innovative and large-scale action to cater for the magnitude of the task of transforming the African continent. Allocation of response resources should be targeted towards the immediate needs of managing the virus as well as future-looking to simultaneously dismantle the structural, systemic barriers which reinforce inequality and disenfranchisement. **We have been presented the opportunity to reimagine and redesign our society into a vibrant and equitable one. We must place women at the core of the response and beyond.**

COVID-19 has caused massive shocks to both the informal and formal economies in Africa. World Bank's Africa's Pulse estimates that the Sub-Saharan Africa region will see significant economic decline, and plunge to between -2.1% to as low as -5.1% this year due to the Covid-19 global crisis. The region is predicted to fall into its first recession for 25 years, reversing encouraging gains over the past two decades, and 2.4% of economic growth experienced just last year alone. The continent is replete with micro and small to medium sized businesses with 85.8% of employment generated by the informal economy. Any successful efforts at economic revitalization need to encompass the informal economy as the informal sector makes up 55% of the economy in sub-Saharan Africa.

Women have been hit particularly hard by this economic downturn. Emerging evidence from the ILO on the impact of COVID-19 suggests that women's economic and productive lives will be affected disproportionately. They have less access to social protections and are the majority of single-parent households. And women in the informal economy are more often found in the most vulnerable situations, including domestic workers, home-based workers, with limited access to social benefits. Their capacity to absorb economic shocks is very low.

As the economic toll of the crisis is felt, there is also an increased risk that female children will be forced into early marriages, and the number of child marriages and early pregnancy may increase as girls are turned into commodities and a source of quick income for families.

Given these shocks to our economy and society at large, it is no surprise that our food systems will be dealt a significant blow resulting in the dangerous exacerbation of food insecurity and nearly doubling current levels of widespread hunger.

COVID 19 has disrupted supply chains and thrown the global food economy into disarray. As border closures, production stoppages, and export restrictions limit supply, demand has surged, inflating prices and impacting the world's poorest and most marginalized people, and Africa is no exception.

Women are central players in the food chain and key to agricultural output on the continent. The agriculture sector is comprised of predominantly small-scale farming with 50% of the agricultural activity on the continent performed by women, who produce about 60-70% of the food in Sub Saharan Africa. There is no way Africa can face this food crisis without empowering rural women, in particular rural women's associations, in the response to COVID. A sector-wide overhaul is needed to disrupt the archaic approaches to food production and distribution as a whole.

Studies in several African countries reveal that the cost of malnutrition has a tremendous impact on a country's economic growth. The knock-on effects of stunting on learning and on earning, is quite debilitating when translated into economic terms. With no data yet for COVID specific impacts, in previous years, for example, losses in GDP are estimated at 10% in Malawi, 11.5% in Rwanda and 16.5% in Ethiopia.

A lack of adequate nutrition is a key contributor to unacceptably high levels of both maternal and child mortality as well as stunting-- and therefore to the loss of human capital for the overall economic, social and political development of the continent. The health impacts of COVID19 go far beyond the obvious impacts of the virus itself.

The fragility of African health systems is revealing itself and women and children are most vulnerable to the lack of attention and adequate specialized services the diversion COVID 19 is causing. Female healthcare workers on the frontlines of the response are at a greater risk of exposure to the Coronavirus than male nurses and doctors.

Data available on the impact of COVID-19 on pregnant women in Africa is currently limited, but the ramifications are likely to be significant. Drawing lessons from the 2014-16 Ebola epidemic in West Africa, a surge in child and maternal mortality was recorded during and after the outbreak, as women stayed away from medical facilities due to quarantine restrictions or misconceptions about virus transmission, and were forced instead into riskier home births.

Domestic violence has increased by upwards of 25% in some countries as a result of lockdowns. Victims face limited access to protective services during periods of quarantine. At least 15 million more cases of domestic violence around the world are predicted in 2020 for every three months that lockdown is extended. In Africa we lack specific data, but should be concerned about an increase in GBV especially in countries where lockdowns and/or jobs losses are high.

Millions of women are taking mental health strain working longer hours, while juggling domestic duties, such as childcare, home schooling in addition to their professional obligations. Increased responsibilities at community and household level are resulting in increased physical and emotional stress as well.

### ***A Call to Bold Action: Dismantling Structural Barriers and Nurturing a Culture of Innovation***

As decision makers respond to the economic and health impacts of the pandemic:

- **All Responses Must Take into Account Gendered Impacts of COVID and Be Informed by the Voices of Women:** Women and women's organizations should be at the heart of the COVID-19 response decision making and designing health and socio-economic policies and plans. An intentional focus on the lives and futures of women and girls is an essential part of breaking structural practices which have been marginalizing them. A system for collecting and disaggregating data needs to be put in place to ensure that the impact of the crisis on women is informing the redesign of fragile and inequitable socio-economic and health systems into fully inclusive, equitable ones.
- **Government and Development Partners Must Implement Gender Lens Economic Policies and Sharpen the Capacity of Women as Engines of Economic Growth:** Give women and female businesses direct access credit, loans, tax and social security payment deferrals and exemptions, and preferential procurement. Structural barriers to access to finance, inheritance, and land rights must be removed. Create and support the enabling environment for ICT infrastructure so rural and urban women are able to contribute to the digital economy and access online platforms to facilitate e-commerce and e-health/education/social exchanges.
- **Invest in Women Along the Local Food Chains to Improve Food Security:** Response resources should target female SMMEs and rural women associations to increase productivity in both formal and informal economies, eradicate hunger and malnutrition. Boost local food production and confront head on the indignity of Africa importing its food. Food security is a fundamental investment in the building of healthy societies.
- **Recognize and Implement Equal Rights in the Workplace:** Provide equal pay for equal work.

- **Narrow Gender-based Education Gaps:** Build ICT infrastructure for online learning to bridge the inequality divide and retrain teachers on virtual curriculum so every African child, especially the girl child, has access to quality education. Efforts to protect girls from child marriage and early pregnancy, and provision of safety net resources for households to keep girls in school are also needed.
- **Strengthen Health Systems, Gradually Implement Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and Provide Mental Health Services** needed as key strategies to the improvement of health systems and citizen wellbeing.
- **Comprehensively Strengthen the Criminal Justice System and Increase Efforts Around Survivor Support and Protection:** Prevention/protection efforts must be deemed as essential services and intentional mass media efforts to spur a fundamental change of mindset whereby GBV is rejected and deemed socially unacceptable and intolerable.

**Women's leadership at all levels is a fundamental requirement to fighting inequality successfully. COVID-19 presents us with unprecedented opportunities for the regeneration of the African socio-economic landscape and the movement towards a just, equitable and sustainably prosperous continent. Let us dare not squander this opportunity for a rebirth.**

Signed




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