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Protecting Women's Livelihoods in Times of Pandemic: Temporary Basic Income and the Road to Gender Equality

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Women face persistent structural challenges to decent jobs and economic independence; their livelihoods are even more vulnerable under the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. This vulnerability is due in part to a system of gender inequality that imposes unpaid care and domestic work on women through socially constructed gender norms, and that deprives them of effective universal protection systems. How to cushion the adverse effects during the emergency while paving the way for structural transformation? This brief examines the most at-risk elements of women's income-generation capacity, presents the possibilities and estimated costs of a Temporary Basic Income (TBI) for women's economic security across the developing world, and discusses some routes towards long-term commitments of economic protection and gender equality.

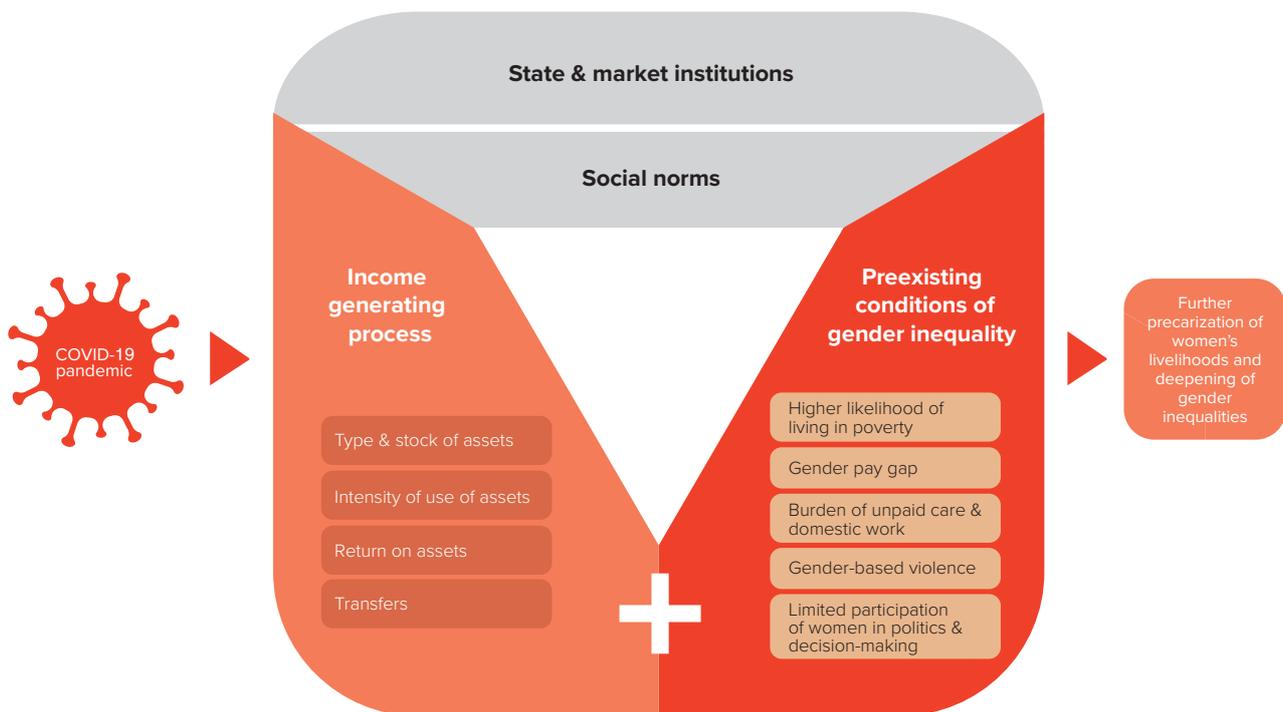
Women's capacity to generate income can be understood as the result of the type and stock of income-producing assets they own (e.g., human capital as a set encompassing education, skills acquired, and experience), the intensity of use of those assets to generate income (e.g., work for profit in the labour market), and the returns on those assets (e.g., earnings)² (Figure 1). This income-generating process may be complemented by transfers received, both private (e.g., remittances or gifts) or public (e.g., cash assistance), and can be affected by at least three non-mutually exclusive factors: state and market

institutions; social norms, particularly responsive to individual circumstances (e.g., sex) and that might translate into exclusion (e.g., barriers to labour participation due to gender discrimination); and the realization of shocks (e.g., loss of employment).

Let's consider human capital as the relevant asset at play in the income-generating function.

Before the pandemic, at the global level the first two factors (institutions and social norms) were persistently putting women at a disadvantage with respect to men, especially in the intensity of the use of human capital through paid employment.

Figure 1: A representation of women's capacity to generate income in the context of COVID-19



The pandemic has hit women's livelihoods especially hard

Women's earnings have been persistently lagging behind men's despite a narrowing of human capital gaps over the recent years.³ Globally, the median share of women aged 25 or older with at least a completed short-cycle tertiary education is higher (21.2 percent) than the corresponding share of men (19.5 percent), whereas the weighted average gross enrollment ratio in tertiary education is 41.7 percent among women and 36.2 percent among men.⁴ Yet, the gender wage gap reached 22 percent on average before the pandemic, ranging from 21-25 percent in middle- and high-income countries.⁵

Critical drivers of this unequal outcome are pervasive social norms that place a disproportionate burden of unpaid work on women, the lack of opportunities for them to reconcile unpaid work with paid work, the vertical and horizontal gender segregation in the labour market where women are overly represented in low-paid occupations, and power imbalances within the household.

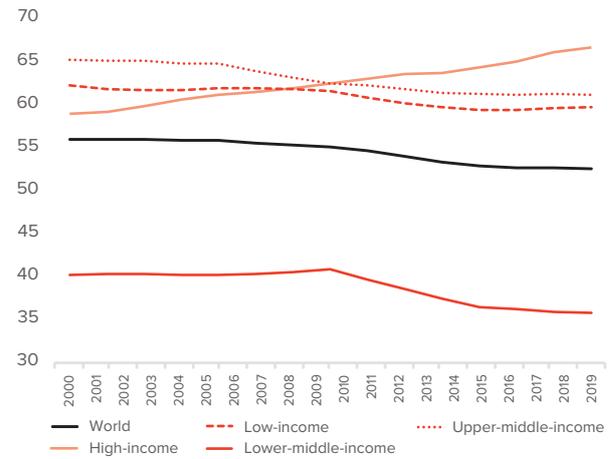
While care and domestic work are essential activities for both human subsistence and human capital accumulation, their neglect as critical contributors to the economy and their unequal

distribution between women and men largely explains women's unfavorable position in the workforce. Worldwide, women do about 12.5 billion hours of unpaid work every day,⁶ which amounts to almost US\$11 trillion a year.⁷ On average women spend 2.4 more hours per day than men on unpaid care and domestic work; among people who participate in the paid economy, women spend an average of 4 hours more per day than men on paid and unpaid work combined.⁸

For women engaged in the labour market, an increase in care responsibilities such as tending to children or sick relatives is likely to weaken their capacity to generate income, because they have fewer hours for paid work. Indeed, women's participation in the labour force had already been on the decline in developing countries (Figure 2), with unpaid care work being the main reason given by women for moving out of the labour force, even though the majority would prefer to work for pay.⁹ Women thus persistently face a potential loss of earnings¹⁰ — of up to 51 percent, according to some estimates¹¹ — because they have or care for children for no pay. Intrahousehold power imbalances and the prevalence of certain social norms limit women's livelihood capacities and decision-making.

Beyond complex gendered norms, some of the economic vulnerability imposed on women also comes from policy and political decisions that have persistently deprived them of compensation in the form of equal pay, paid maternity leave, universal health, unemployment, and care benefits. The latter are critical as about seven in ten female workers worldwide are in the informal economy with little or none of these benefits,¹² and those with care responsibilities in particular are more likely to engage in self-employment, domestic work, and occupations that often expose them to health hazards, precarious working conditions, and exploitation.¹³ Given this precarization of female empowerment and labour opportunities, it is not surprising that women are 25 percent more likely than men to live in extreme poverty.¹⁴

Figure 2: Female labour force participation rate, 1991-2019 (% of women aged 15-64)



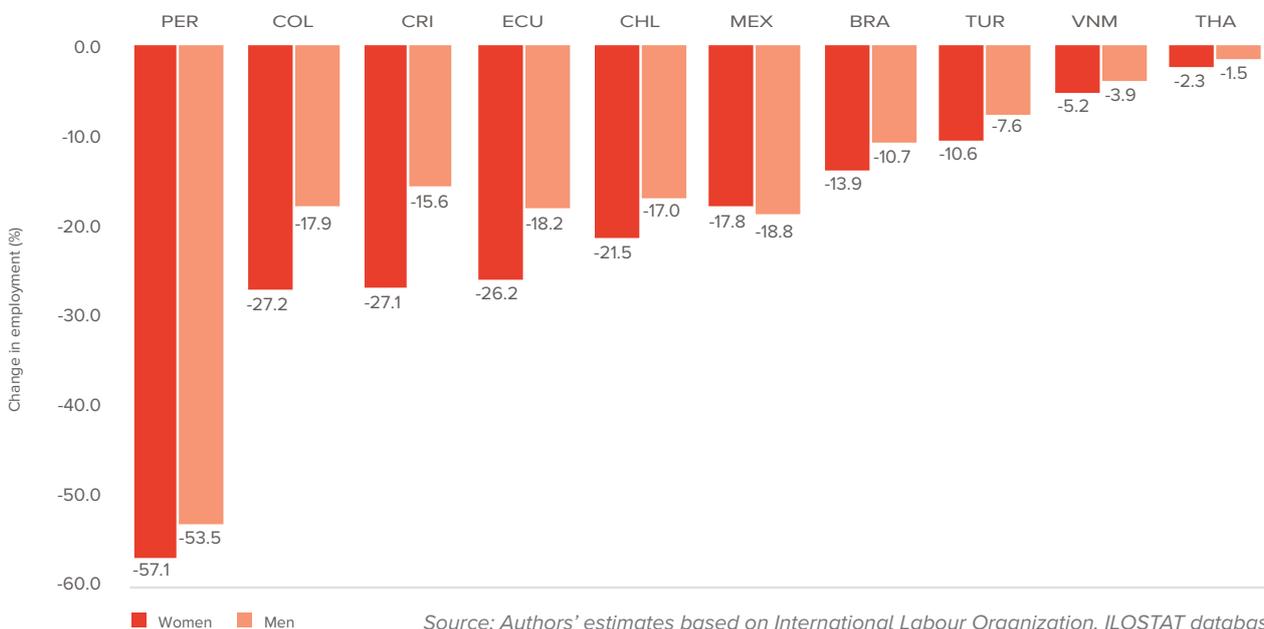
Source: International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database.

Women have been left in a precarious position

The advent of the shock of COVID-19, the third factor affecting women’s income generation, has had disproportionate economic impacts on women that have only intensified the preexisting disadvantages —and could likely reverse more than 20 years of efforts in support of gender equality.¹⁵ In the short term, those impacts have landed

particularly hard on paid employment and earnings. Available data for some Latin American countries reveals that women’s employment in the second quarter of 2020 dropped by more than 13 percent in comparison to the same period in 2019, and that the effect has been between 10 and 70 percent higher in comparison to the corresponding decline among male workers¹⁶ (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Change in employment in selected countries between the second quarters of 2019 and 2020



Source: Authors’ estimates based on International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database.

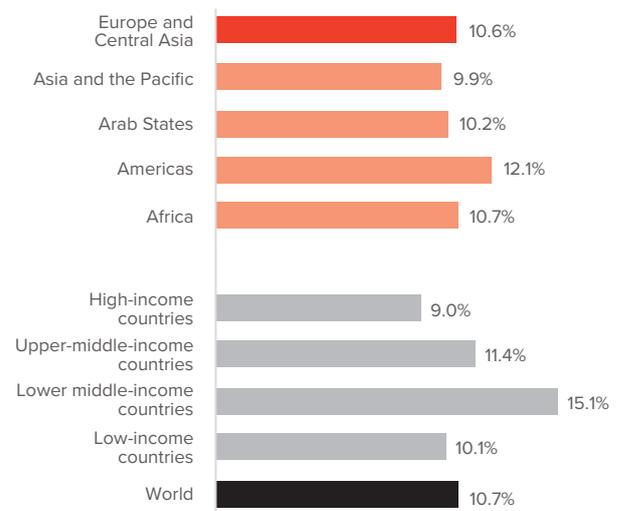
This disproportionate result is related partly to the closure of some non-essential sectors of the economy to contain the spread of the virus, namely hospitality, wholesale and retail, administrative activities, and paid domestic work. These sectors include a significant share of female employment: about 40 percent at the global level, ranging from 45-49 percent in South and East Asia and South America to 59 percent in Central America. Just in paid domestic work, where eight in ten workers are women, around 70 percent globally were at high risk of losing their jobs at the beginning of June 2020.¹⁷

The immediate consequence of lowered employment is the total or partial loss of earnings. Total labour incomes are estimated to have decreased by 10.7 percent on average during the first three quarters of 2020, relative to the same period in 2019, and this loss is expected to be 11-15 percent higher among middle-income countries (Figure 4).¹⁸ Although gender-disaggregated data are not yet available, these figures provide a lower bound of the potential effects on women's livelihoods. These effects can be expected to be both drastic (as women's incomes were already lower than men's, and safety nets were absent) and prolonged (as the sudden drop of incomes often persists with a low recovery well beyond the end of the crisis).¹⁹ Recent estimates by UNDP and UN Women suggest that the interplay of these factors could push nearly 50 million women into extreme poverty, thus widening the gap between men and women who live in poverty, while further impoverishing those already living in those conditions.²⁰

Another part of the story behind the disproportionate employment effects on women is that the pandemic and the responses to it are substantially driving up the demand for care. The closure of daycare centers and schools and the need to care for household members with preexisting health risk factors is likely shifting work from the paid economy not only to unemployment, but also to the unpaid economy — thus driving female workers completely out of the labour force and placing them in the most difficult circumstances.²¹ This is especially concerning among single mothers who cannot work from home.

In developing countries, women face a triple threat: a digital divide, oppressive gender norms, and a lack of protection systems. In most developing countries, the gender digital divide makes it harder for self-employed and entrepreneur women to adapt to the new circumstances. Also in such

Figure 4: Share of labour income lost due to working-hour losses; first three quarters of 2020



Source: International Labour Organization Nowcasting model.

countries, childcare systems are not universally accessible, and gender norms assigning women the role of the main caregiver prevail even if they have not been pushed to involuntary unemployment. UNDP's social norms report shows that half of men globally consider that in times of crisis and scarcity jobs should be prioritized for men over women,²² whereas evidence from previous epidemics like Ebola and Zika suggests that women and girls take the bulk of unpaid care work when formal protection systems are lacking.²³

Looking at the longer term, the crisis is likely to also hit hard on the first element of women's capacity to generate income: the accumulation of human capital. There is reason to expect persisting effects in the next generation of women due to the unprecedented disruption of girls' education. Moreover, the loss of household income could have long-lasting consequences for children's health and cognitive development through at least two channels: poor nutrition as a result of lowered quantity and quality of food, and increased stress levels within the household as a result of worries about livelihoods and the increasing burden of care.²⁴ This debilitation of human-capital accumulation could put tomorrow's women at greater risk of limited economic opportunities, thus prolonging some of the most pernicious outcomes, including adolescent pregnancy and a deteriorated bargaining power within the household, which can also be associated with domestic violence.

How to mitigate the immediate adverse effects on women's livelihoods?

The crisis is bringing to the fore the urgency of a committed discussion on social, institutional, and labour market reforms for the unambiguous and permanent improvement of women's income-generating capacity in the long term. Yet, mitigating the immediate economic effects of the pandemic on women's livelihoods requires a decisive response.

A recent UNDP report proposed the roll-out of a shock-resistant, unconditional Temporary Basic Income (TBI) to benefit up to 2.8 billion economically vulnerable people across developing countries.²⁵ As these countries are likely operating under limited fiscal capacity and prioritization, a special TBI for women may emerge as a paramount policy instrument that recognizes the disproportionate effect of the crisis on a group that faces persistent and cumulative vulnerabilities across several dimensions. Beyond supporting women in securing their basic needs and compensating for their job and income losses, such an instrument might help boost women's freedom of spending and economic independence, as well as balance the control of economic resources within the household. Hence, **a TBI for women is an emergency measure of affirmative action** that could start paving the road towards a public good that the whole society can benefit from: gender equality.

Crucially, a TBI for women is not a substitute but an urgent complement to the response policies already in place. This is critical as **most of the response to the crisis has not been designed to be gender-sensitive**. According to the COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker by UNDP and UN Women, only one in ten countries and territories have policies addressing women's economic security needs, just 8 percent of the social protection and labour market responses address unpaid care, and only 10 percent of the fiscal measures are channeling resources to female-dominated sectors³⁰ — and the type of policy responses and priorities may be **driven by preexisting patterns of exclusion of women in decision-making**.

The proposed TBI focuses on working-age women, aged 15-64, in the developing world and considers a monthly transfer that is homogeneous within a given country but varies across countries according to the cost of living. The amount of the TBI is equivalent to 50 percent of the income of the typical citizen in each country and would ideally reflect a minimum standard of needs that is relative to each country's stage of development. Whatever the case, the TBI is set so that it cannot go lower than the absolute global standard of extreme poverty of \$1.90 a day.³¹

Box 1: Would a Temporary Basic Income (TBI) reach the intended recipients?

Critical conditions for TBI to contribute to women's economic security and independence is that the scheme is **provided at the individual level** and not be subject to behavior and spending conditions. While specific fiscal and political implementation challenges are discussed at some length in UNDP's TBI report and need to be addressed on a country-by-country basis,²⁶ for women to receive the transfer, they also **need to have bank or mobile money accounts**, which is still not a reality for 35 percent of women worldwide.²⁷ Hence, a TBI may need to be tied to initiatives to improve financial inclusion to work.

What to do if public authorities cannot reach some women or do not even have them in their records as existing? In some cases, alternative solutions such as **partnering with local social networks** that have greater proximity to women in remote areas or informal settlements may be necessary to fill in for an absent state.²⁸ Additional efforts for establishing **functioning civil registration systems**, especially birth registration, would be critical for women to access TBI benefits — and for citizens in general to exert their rights and have access to social protection services, among other services.²⁹ Once registered, **transparent administration with accountability mechanisms** is essential.

All these elements may facilitate transfer payments sent directly to women, thus ideally providing them with economic support and independence. The question of whether they would control their own bank or mobile accounts remains open. Depending on household dynamics and power relations, some women may not have full control over their own resources if **pervasive gender norms** are not **disrupted**.

The overall cost of the TBI for working-age women is assessed under three scenarios of coverage depending on the typical thresholds used to assess each country's living standard:

1. Those living on less than the daily poverty line: \$1.90 among low-income countries, and \$3.20 and \$5.50 among lower-middle- and upper-middle-income countries, respectively.³²
2. Those living on less than the daily vulnerability line: estimated at \$5.50³³ and \$13³⁴ in middle-income countries where poverty is assessed, respectively, at \$3.20 and \$5.50 a day, and assumed at \$3.20 for low-income countries where no estimates of a vulnerability line are known.
3. Universal coverage.

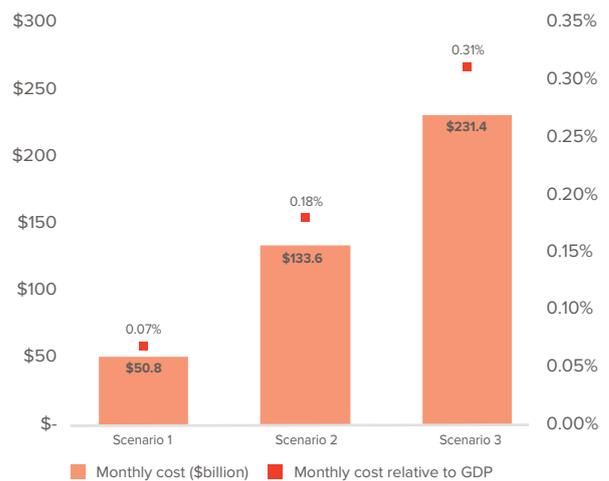
Using pre-crisis data for 132 developing countries,³⁵ the total coverage for working-age women and monthly cost (Figure 5 and Table 1) of the TBI for each scenario is as follows:

- For 613.2 million working-age women with incomes below the poverty lines, the TBI amounts to PPP\$51 billion a month, or 0.07 percent of developing countries' GDP.
- For 1.32 billion working-age women living under the vulnerability lines, the monthly cost of the TBI reaches almost PPP\$134 billion, or 0.18 percent of the GDP.
- For all 2.03 billion working-age women across the developing world, the TBI costs around PPP\$231 billion a month, or 0.31 percent of the GDP.

In East Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East and North Africa, the monthly cost as a share of each region's GDP could amount to less than 0.07 percent for the first coverage scenario and it could range from 0.10 to 0.20 percent for

the second scenario. Naturally, the costs tend to be particularly large for populous low-income countries, such as those concentrated in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where the monthly cost could reach 0.14 to 0.21 percent in the first scenario, and 0.25 to 0.31 percent in the second. As for the scenario of universal coverage of working-age women, the monthly cost could range from 0.30 to 0.40 percent of the GDP across the six regions. Considering a time frame of six months of benefits, given the magnitude and duration of the shock on women's livelihoods, the total cost of a TBI under the two largest coverage scenarios could amount, respectively, to PPP\$802 billion and PPP\$1.39 trillion, or 1.1 to 1.9 percent of the developing world's GDP.

Figure 5: Monthly costs of a TBI for working-age women



Source: Authors' estimates based on World Bank's PovcalNet and IMF's World Economic Outlook Database for 132 developing countries' GDP.

Notes: Monthly amounts are expressed in international dollars at 2011 PPP exchange rates.

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