



Gendered Impacts of the COVID-19 in Central and West Asia: Opportunities and Lessons for Gender-Responsive Public Investments (A Brief Summary of the Initial Findings of the Ongoing Study)

Women disproportionately carry the weight of any global economic crisis. Austerity measures in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2008 economic crises especially affected women in the poorer strata of the population. The gendered effects of these crises were primarily related to women's role as unpaid workers in the domestic and community care systems, to the labor sectors that they were mainly inserted in, as well as to their higher labor precariousness. It is estimated that the economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic will be much deeper than previous crises, hence women could be hit even harder.

The study on "Gendered Impacts of the COVID-19 in Central and West Asia: Opportunities and Lessons for Gender-Responsive Public Investments" sheds light on the extent of the impact of the pandemic and highlights the operationally relevant initiatives, and emerging results from policy and public investment and particularly ADB projects in eight of the 10 countries the Central and West Asia (CWA) region namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Gendered data on COVID cases and deaths are not widely available and not updated in all countries across the region. Available data show that in most countries men were at a higher risk of dying from COVID infection. Some challenges women faced as a result of the pandemic are negative employment and livelihood impacts in specific sectors, particularly women-owned MSMEs, an overall increase in violence against women and girls, and the burden of unpaid work and its connection to mental health and lower income generating opportunities. Governments have also encountered increased difficulties of prioritizing gender issues in an emergency setting, at least in some countries, and lack of reliable gender data to develop gender-responsive evidence-based policies and public investment.

Government response to these gender-related challenges has been less encouraging. The COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker developed by the United Nations Development Programme shows that only over a third of the 218 policy measures implemented by governments in the region in response to COVID-19 are gender sensitive. At least 75% of policy measures that regulate the labor market and social protection are not gender sensitive. In the majority of CWA countries, national legislation exists to promote gender equality, but national statistics and global gender indicators point to persistent gender-based disparities across multiple indices in all CWA countries. A systemic gender gap in labor force participation across all countries exists, with disparities in employment rates, pay scales, and quality of employment.

ADB responded quickly and effectively to the pandemic and committed operations at an unprecedented scale. Its support to the COVID response of governments was mainly channeled through the COVID-19 Pandemic Response Option (CPRO), Emergency Assistance Loans, and Special Assistance Grants, mostly starting in 2020. Projects in the framework of the Asia Pacific Vaccination Facility Initiative took off in 2021. The comprehensive and diverse package of loans and grants, amounting to around 3.45 billion USD, was meant to support governments to contain and tackle COVID-19 pandemic impacts.

Emerging evidence shows that ADB's efforts to mainstream gender and development considerations into its COVID-19 support has been successful. The inclusion of an effective, pro-poor countercyclical expenditure program as access criteria for CPRO support increased the focus of COVID response operations on social assistance, economic stimulus, and health measures. This expanded financing for social protection and vulnerable groups, including women and girls. The requirement to assess the criteria, together with the gender monitoring matrixes for programs rated as effective gender mainstreaming, enabled ADB to engage in meaningful dialogue with governments on the design and implementation of their COVID-19 response packages with emphasis placed on poor and disadvantaged groups, including women and girls.