

Excellencies,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Colleagues and friends,

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to speak at the MASHAV's International Women Leaders Conference on the "*Social and Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Women and Girls*" today. As the world is battling the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, I am proud to be part of this amazing team of women leaders and express solidarity and commitment to act in partnership with all of you to tackle the multi-faceted impact of this crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic has spread worldwide and is affecting all areas of our life in an unprecedented way: from changing the way we work, study, communicate, to functioning in our everyday life. The format of our meeting today – as an online discussion – is another example.

We all have witnessed that the COVID-19 crisis affects everyone, but women and girls face specific and often disproportionate economic, health and social risks; from an increased burden of unpaid care work to worsening rates of gender-based violence.

Let me share with you some evidence on the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women and girls from our region.

- Women are on the frontline of the fight against COVID-19 pandemic: Women make up the majority of workers in the health care sector – exceeding 75 per cent for the UNECE region – and have been under enormous pressure. At the same time care professions are also among the most underpaid jobs.
- Women dominate as employees in the so-called system-relevant sectors, such as supermarkets and pharmacies. Women are over 82 per cent of all cashiers in our region. This has exposed them to a higher risk of infection compared to men.
- Unpaid care and domestic work of women has substantially increased: The COVID-19 pandemic has caused enormous challenges for women: some losing their jobs, others juggling home office and increased demand for childcare and domestic work during lockdown. The average 13 hours per week that women spent more than men on unpaid care work in our region before the pandemic has gone up with the closure of schools and

childcare centres. The situation and trends differ between subregions and countries. The share of women's unpaid work in total work is around 60 percent in Northern Europe, against 65 percent in Western Europe and 70 percent in Southern Europe, whereas men's is above 40 percent in Northern Europe and in Western Europe (except in the Netherlands), and below 40 percent in Southern Europe. There are substantial additional burdens for childcare for families with young children; in some Western European countries it is estimated an additional 49 hours per week, 60 percent of which falls to women.

- Decline in financial security: The sharp reduction of employment opportunities has hit women's financial security. Women in precarious employment are most vulnerable to the economic downturn which started with the health crisis. Over a quarter of women employees in our region are in precarious jobs as compared to about 15 per cent for men. These jobs provide lower earnings and weaker legal protection. The reduction of part-time jobs and other labour market opportunities, in particular in the service sectors such as food, hospitality and tourism, where women are predominantly employed, has resulted in a significant drop in earnings and an increase in poverty.
- Support from remittances has sharply diminished: Many single female-headed households in the Western Balkans, Central Asia and the Caucasus that have relied largely on remittances in the past few years are hit strongly by the contraction of economic activity in the host countries, job losses and mobility restrictions. The risk of poverty for these women and their children has drastically increased.
- Violence against women and girls has increased, in some countries with over 30%. Under strict lockdown measures women were trapped in their homes, and they also had nowhere to go with shelters being closed.

These developments threaten not only to stall, but to undermine decades of progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women. 2020 should have been a ground-breaking year for gender equality, marking the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the most progressive and comprehensive agenda for gender equality. Instead, we now have to make sure that the limited and hard-won gains on gender equality and women's rights will not be reversed.

What can we do to meet our commitments to gender equality in the post

COVID-19 period? How is UNECE contributing to stop the negative trend of rising gender inequalities?

From the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic we have joined forces with all our partners in the UN system – at global and regional levels – in providing support to our member States as a response to this health and humanitarian crisis in various socio-economic areas. More specifically, work was centered around the implementation of the UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19, which operationalizes the UN Secretary General’s report “Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impact of COVID-19”. We have also worked together with UN Women and other UN agencies on integrating gender considerations into the COVID-19 responses at the country level to ensure that the voices of women and girls are included, and their needs are met both in the immediate responses as well as in the plans for recovery.

Transparent and inclusive cooperation is the only way to lead us through the COVID-19 crises and its social and economic consequences.

Now, let me turn to two examples where such a partnership is on-going and my Organisation takes an active role in the related activities.

My first example is in the priority area of building resilience to the pandemic in our member States through social and economic policies with a gender lens.

In June, in cooperation with our sister regional commissions we started a project to strengthen national capacities for assisting rapid recovery from Covid-19 and building resilience against future shocks. This includes a strong focus on gender-responsive economic and social policies to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the care economy where the unpaid care and domestic work of women is concentrated. The regional assessments will provide a detailed analysis of the existing governmental responses and identify key challenges that our countries face in designing and implementing gender-sensitive policies in this area.

My second example relates to women’s and girls’ participation in all forms and levels of the COVID-19 response through access to technology (internet with its various platforms, mobile phone, etc).

To equip women entrepreneurs with updated knowledge and skills on the use of ICTs we regularly organize together with MASHAV and Golda Meir Mount Carmel International Training Center (MCTC) international workshops. This year, in our workshop which took place in June and beginning of July, we have

focused on the use of ICTs with a gender lens for the needs of the small business, which combines the gender mainstreaming approach with the technological tools. I would like to take the opportunity to sincerely thank MASHAV and MCTC, its Director, Ms. Hava Karrie and all team, for the long-standing fruitful cooperation on gender activities in the areas of information sharing and capacity building for professional women from Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We will continue to put a gender lens to all areas of our work, and in cooperation with our partners in the UN system, civil society and the private sector, advocate for a sustainable recovery that is closely connected with the empowerment of women and the achievement of gender equality in all spheres.

Together, we must use the COVID-19 crisis to accelerate change, expand the opportunities for women and girls to be part and parcel of the solution to set up a new normal mode of working and living, and by that shape the future of the planet for the benefit of all. I am deeply convinced that today's and tomorrow's exchange of experience, strategies and tools to find solutions and mitigate the impact of the COVID19 pandemic on women and girls across the globe will be a valuable contribution to turn the tide on the many challenges we are facing today.