By the end of 2020, COVID-19 had infected around 85 million people worldwide and led to nearly 2 million deaths. COVID-19 has changed the world profoundly, causing death and devastation and with aftershocks that will scar future generations. Beyond the virus, deaths are resulting indirectly from the pandemic as health systems are disrupted, gender-based violence increases, and the economic fallout deepens inequality, hunger, despair, and extreme deprivation. Behind the statistics are the human stories. And behind health systems are the women who are the majority of health and social care workers. The truth exposed by COVID-19 is that global security – now and in the future - depends on women.

2021 is our opportunity to rethink and rebuild global health on a stronger, gender-equal foundation and ensure that the women who deliver health and social care lead the systems they know best.

These are the 10 issues we will be watching in 2021:

1. **COVID isn’t over…** our 5 Asks for global health security are still the same

Despite the development of vaccines, COVID-19 isn’t over and continues to spread in all regions. In March 2020 Women and Global Health issued a Call to Action with 5 Asks to address the impact of pandemics for women and girls and strengthen health security for all. In 2021 we will continue to campaign for all five asks.
We are delighted that COVID-19 vaccines have been developed so rapidly – with women playing a leading role – but although 38 million doses of vaccine had been delivered in Europe, North America, and Asia by the middle of January, not one dose had been delivered in Africa. We call for equity in access to vaccines and diagnostics between and within countries. First, we ask donor governments to ensure our generation goes down in history as the generation that ended COVID-19 by ensuring access to vaccines for people everywhere. That will mean ending ‘vaccine nationalism’ and committing funds to ensure vaccines reach low-income countries in sufficient numbers to cover everyone and that, in turn, means special measures to ensure vaccines reach the most marginalized women and girls who typically have the least access to health services. In 2020 WGH worked with the Foundation for Innovative and New Diagnostics (FIND) to chart the barriers women face in accessing diagnostics and also the role women play in enabling access to diagnostics for everyone. Many of the barriers women face accessing diagnostics apply equally to vaccines. Special measures will be needed to reach and reassure pregnant and breastfeeding women subject to misinformation and ‘vaccine hesitancy’. Gender equal vaccine distribution and access to diagnostics will not ‘just happen’ without special action to ensure women are informed and enabled. We will make this a priority in 2021. In 2020 WGH worked with the Foundation for Innovative and New Diagnostics (FIND) to chart the barriers women face in accessing diagnostics and also the role women play in enabling access to diagnostics for everyone.
June 2021 will see the launch of the landmark International Labour Organization Convention 190 (ILO190) to end Violence and Harassment at work. Currently, 68 countries have no laws prohibiting workplace sexual harassment. Female health and social care workers report violence and sexual harassment from all countries, perpetrated by male colleagues, patients, and members of the community. Women working in domestic, outreach, and remote locations are at particular risk, as are female migrants. There are no reliable global figures on prevalence and cases in the health sector often go unrecorded and unpunished. Violence and harassment do significant harm to the lives and health of survivors and limit women’s social and economic potential. Health systems are damaged by resulting stress, attrition, low morale, and absenteeism. On sexual harassment, however, the UN does not stand on the moral high ground. Survivors of sexual harassment and abuse within the UN system face lengthy and non-transparent processes that too often, do not result in justice. New cases of abuse of vulnerable women and children by UN staff continue to be reported despite policies and measures to deter abusers. These abuses impose costs on everyone and in 2021 WGH will campaign for countries to ratify and action ILO190 and for reform and justice for women within the UN.

This year we will be part of the Generation Equality Forums and UN General Assembly Special Session delayed from 2020, to mark 25 years since the Fourth UN Conference for Women in Beijing. No country has yet achieved gender equality and SDG 5 on Gender Equality is not on track to be achieved by 2030. Worse, the pandemic is increasing inequality between women and men and girls and boys, with more women losing their jobs, more girls removed from school, increased child marriage, and early pregnancy, and violence against women increasing everywhere. 2021 is the year to accelerate action on the SDGs, especially Gender Equality, not to use the pandemic to justify reversing the gains made by women and girls.
In 2021 the world’s most powerful female political leader, Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel, will leave politics after 15 respected years in office. In January 2020 only 12 out of 193 countries (6.2%) had a female head of government so Merkel, as a role model of female leadership, will be sorely missed. Several pieces of research and many media articles have asked whether women political leaders have been more effective in managing the response to COVID-19 than their male counterparts? It certainly looks that way but as yet it is too early in the pandemic to draw definite conclusions. What is clear, however, is that despite women working at all levels in health security—from the front lines of health services to research labs and health policy-making – they have been in the minority in global and national decision-making bodies on COVID-19. Our research of 115 national COVID-19 task forces found that 85% had a majority male membership. The current pandemic makes it clear that the gender stereotypes and bias keeping women out of health leadership put us all at risk. We cannot fight a global pandemic by drawing experts from just half the talent pool. We will be tracking women’s representation in COVID-19 decision making in 2021 and calling for gender-equal global health leadership, as ever.

In 2020 the Black Lives Matter movement put the unfinished struggle for racial justice at the top of the global agenda. The pandemic has exposed the deep social, economic, and political inequalities that drive ill health and pandemics within and between countries. Data from the USA shows higher mortality from COVID-19 amongst Black and Latina groups and in the UK, amongst black and South Asian groups. In addition to arguing for an intersectional approach to global health inequalities, we are calling for a mindset change and profound shift of power in global health from the Global North to the Global South. Through our movement and growing network of chapters, we will continue to bring the voices of the least represented women to the global health table where their perspectives and experiences enrich decision making.
Multilateralism – the USA rejoining the world

In our letter to the incoming Biden administration in the US, we called on the new administration to fully re-engage with WHO, restore funding to UNFPA, and end the ‘global gag rule’ which cut funding for reproductive and maternal health services and cost the lives of women and adolescent girls in low-income countries. Through our US chapters, we will engage with the new administration and encourage America to re-engage positively with global health and at the same time, end the tragically high COVID-19 death toll within its own borders.

Global climate action – not forgetting women and girls

Whilst working on the pandemic, we will not take our focus off climate change and the interconnected nature of health and our environment. We will therefore be tracking the 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow in November and working with others to ensure the impact of climate change upon the health and well-being of the poorest women and girls is not forgotten.

Building back better - building back equal

Finally, as discussions on rethinking health systems and global health security post-pandemic begin, WGH will be there to ensure that gender equality and the contribution of women to global health are central to building back a better, equal world.

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