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Women Parliamentarian Network Report 2021:
Covid-19 and Its Impact on Women

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Executive Summary:

The Disproportionate Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Women Globally

The coronavirus pandemic had a disproportionate impact on women globally. The economic fallout of the pandemic significantly affected women and additional domestic care responsibilities furthered economic and social burdens. There was a marked increase in domestic abuse globally throughout the pandemic and this highlighted ongoing legislative challenges that parliamentarians face. However, the gendered implications of covid-19 have not been accounted for sufficiently in policy responses. This has exposed the urgent need to increase and enhance the inclusion of women in decision-making at all levels to ensure that policies are prioritised in accordance to need, and that resources are allocated accordingly.

The Women Parliamentarian Network (WPN) convened regularly online throughout the pandemic to connect women parliamentarians with relevant experts and decisionmakers to discuss the impact of the pandemic on women and to identify potential policy responses. The Network also met in-person in Helsinki in November 2021 to explore these issues further, and to discuss broader challenges.

Optimism for a 'new world' that emerged during the beginning of the pandemic has receded. Almost two years after governments introduced restrictions in response to covid-19, parliamentarians have noted that 'nothing has changed and everything has changed.' While there was optimism for economic structural change in the early stages of the pandemic, there has been little movement and, in many countries, economic models have remained the same.

Women lost their jobs at a disproportionately higher rate than men during the pandemic; globally, women's employment dropped 5% between 2019 and 2020 (compared to 3.9% for men).¹ Countries in the MENA region saw women's employment drop 4.1%, compared to 1.9% for men during this period. Furthermore, despite women being overrepresented in sectors impacted by the virus, such as the health sector, it has been found that when job-loss occurs, available employment opportunities go to men first.²

Alongside challenges related to employment, the increased burden of childcare impacted women disproportionately during the pandemic. Globally, it was reported that women spent an average 173 additional hours on unpaid childcare in the first 6 months of the pandemic, compared to 59 additional hours for men.³ This trend was similar for other unpaid domestic work, including teaching at home and caring for elderly members of the family.

As the economic and social impacts of the pandemic unfolded, domestic abuse rose exponentially during lockdowns, with the UN naming it the Shadow Pandemic.⁴ Where legislation to tackle domestic violence exists, laws are often not implemented and fail to protect women and families. Governments and policymakers must prioritise action in this area, with a drive for effective legislation that protects victims, punishes abusers, educates the public, provides accessible safety and support for victims, and acts as a deterrent to potential perpetrators.

In countries where there is opposition to legislation aimed at addressing domestic abuse, policymakers should look to surrounding countries for best practices and guidance and draw on the support of the international community. Efforts at developing domestic abuse legislation will arguably be more successful if bottom-up and community-based approaches are incorporated as well as top-down policymaking, so that support for legislation develops by the time it is voted on. It is important to also engage men in legislative processes so that they also champion the fundamental human rights of all, especially women and children.

The cost of domestic abuse must be understood fully and can also be factored into legislation. This argument was used in the UK, where the cost of domestic abuse in 2017 alone was £66 billion, with the greatest cost within that pertaining to the physical and emotional harm suffered by the victims themselves, at around £47 billion a year.⁵

During the pandemic, global developments significantly impacted prospects for women. Following the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan on 31 August 2021 and the Taliban's assumption of power, women and girls in the country have faced human rights violations and devastating challenges. Women in Afghanistan must continue to be supported through the ongoing delivery of small grassroots projects and the provision of education for women and girls must be maintained.

Addressing the challenges women faced during the pandemic requires the inclusion of women in politics and decision making. Only 26.1% of parliamentary seats and 22.6% of ministerial positions are held by women globally.⁶ A failure to include women's voices at the heart of decision making directly impacts which issues are prioritised and, subsequently, where resources are allocated. However, while women's participation in decision making must be promoted, participation does not guarantee that women's voices are listened to or taken seriously.

Governments and international financial institutions must radically transform their approaches to recognise public health, education, and childcare as an 'investment,' such as infrastructure and transport, rather than as 'costs.' This will mean that when financial constraints exist, public health and education will be prioritised, rather than reduced or eliminated.

Women parliamentarians and decision makers both in Europe and the Gulf-MENA region continue to face varied and ongoing challenges in their work. Women express that they often feel unable to achieve success without adjusting their behaviour to fit societal norms, and misogyny continues to impact their opportunities. In countries that have achieved high-level and meaningful participation of women in politics and public life, challenges are ongoing and highlight that representation is not a 'silver bullet' for creating widespread change.

Women parliamentarians and decisionmakers from Europe and the Gulf-MENA region share a common understanding and experience of the challenges that women in politics and broader society face. Shared experiences enable the identification of ongoing challenges that must be addressed and creates significant opportunities to identify ways in which solutions can be advanced together.



Foreword

Since 2020, I have had the pleasure of chairing the Helsinki Policy Forum's Women Parliamentarian Network (WPN), which has steadily expanded to incorporate women leaders from sixteen countries across Europe, North America, and the Middle East. This report captures the analysis of the Network over the past two years as the members of network found themselves responding to Covid-19.

What strikes me from this report is that, despite the many differences between countries in terms of GDP, political culture, and history, the challenges facing women policymakers are shared.

Women everywhere are still denied opportunities because of their gender. Daily, they face the prospect of violence and confront misogyny online. The burden of care work continues to fall disproportionately on women, and when economic crises hit, it is women who are the first to find themselves unemployed. Women who try to speak out against these ills and reject the structures that produce them, are too often dismissed, mocked, or silenced.

Given these realities, there is considerable value in having a confidential space where women policymakers come together as peers, to offer practical advice. While every context is unique, the insights from one experience can prove profoundly helpful to those trying to develop answers to similar problems. As this report outlines, there are countless examples of this within the Network, from British parliamentarians supporting their colleagues in Lebanon design legislation to combat domestic violence, to the Network sharing ideas on how to make Covid recovery packages gender sensitive.

I want to thank all the members of the network for their energetic engagement and tireless efforts to build a world where women are full, equal, and respected members of society. This work must continue.

Baroness Helena Kennedy QC

Chair of the Women Parliamentarian Network, Member of the House of Lords, Director of the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute

Introductory Remarks

We have all lived through three years in a world that was not a very happy place. We, as leaders and systems, are not moving forward though people are working hard to be innovative and find solutions. Often the realization of the solutions seems as if it is not in the hands of the people. It requires governments, policies, laws, structures, institutions, resources, both human and financial.

One most direct example comes from the one-year after COVID report issued by the two co-chairs of the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response: Honorable Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand and President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, former President of Liberia. The report is entitled: Transforming or Tinkering: Inaction lays the groundwork for another pandemic. This is certainly a very revealing title of the state of the world today.

During the past couple of years, The Helsinki Policy Forum, and its Women Parliamentarian Network, supported by Forward Thinking, was engaged in a series of conversations with parliamentarians from different parts of the world, but especially from the Middle East and North Africa on confronting the impact of COVID-19. The conversations were sometimes painful, other times substantive, and yet other times uplifting simply because we hear the commitment of parliamentarians to activate their roles in this very unwelcomed world environment and the courage of local leaders to lead their communities.

The world was facing many challenging crises at the same time, from wars and conflicts, to refugees, displaced and migrants, to natural disaster and of course COVID-19 took over the attention of everyone.

Within this context, Covid-19 was a wake-up call to the global, regional, national and local communities, especially the leadership at all these levels. It sharply laid world bare in front of its own weaknesses from the personal and individual to the institutional. It exposed the weaknesses in our systems for responding to pandemics and the need for better preparation. And it also exposed the inequality and inequity within nations and among them. It lay bare the suffering of the poor in all countries, including those in high income, and highlighted gender inequality in all societies.

It is critical that we acknowledge that the Covid-19 pandemic is not over and the virus is returning in different mutations; therefore, it is urgent to take the necessary fundamental political decisions to stop the next phase, which will eventually become an even worse human crisis.

The world has the know-how and ability. The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response has provided a roadmap in its first report, and it is one report among a few others.

Basically, we have to accept that readiness and response to health threats is not a choice. There is progress, but it's too slow, too fragmented and too focussed on "aid" rather than on the equity, multilateral responsibility and the required inclusivity. The solution begins with highest-level of political leadership across sectors— where the current fragmented reforms can be brought together into a coherent system that generates the finance, equitable tools, support, and accountability. And here an all-government approach beyond the ministries of health has a role, along with parliamentarians, private sector, civil society organizations and leadership of communities.

What is required now to move the world forward in preparedness and response focussing on five specific measures: effective surveillance and alarms including through legal instruments, adequate financing that is beyond and above the Official Development Assistance (ODA) budgets that would provide new sufficient and stable finance for readiness and crises, equity in accessing pandemic tools like vaccines, treatments and diagnostics, strengthening the World Health Organization, as the multilateral organization of health, and securing the highest level political leadership in all sectors. If we continue at the present slow pace, it will take years to achieve these measures. For now, we remain stuck with largely the same tools and system we had at the outset of 2020 when the COVID virus first emerged.

The challenge that the world is facing focusses on the criticality of political will to adopt preparedness and response in all its measures. With the emergence of new crises, such as the war in Ukraine, the attention of the world, and especially policymakers, has shifted away from pandemic preparedness and response.

The pandemic is not over, and others will come. What is needed now is action-oriented, decisive, and inclusive high-level political leadership that delivers a coherent system ensuring a safer world. The world has the know-how and the ability to end this crisis, it just needs to move faster and with commitment to saving people, wherever they are on this globe. Parliamentarians are most equipped to adopt these demands.

Thoraya Obaid

Former Executive Director, UNFPA and Member of the International Panel on Pandemic Preparedness

Definition of domestic abuse

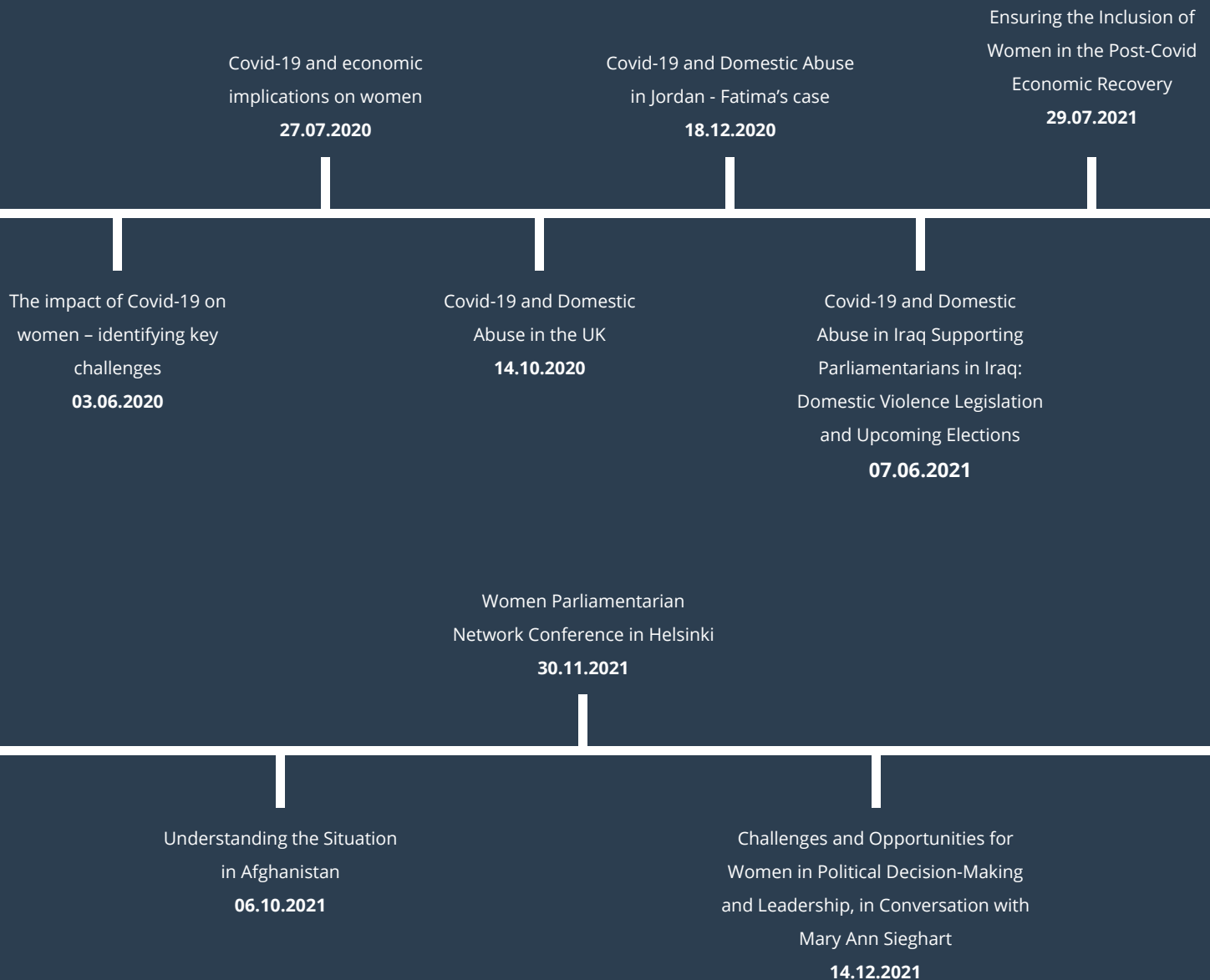
This report follows the UN definition of ‘domestic abuse’ and uses the term interchangeably with ‘domestic violence’. It also discusses violence against women and children and gender-based violence (GBV). According to the UN, domestic abuse can be defined as "a pattern of behaviour in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. Abuse is physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviours that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound someone. Domestic abuse can happen to anyone of any race, age, sexual orientation, religion, or gender. It can occur within a range of relationships including couples who are married, living together or dating. Domestic violence affects people of all socioeconomic backgrounds and education levels."⁷

Recommendations for Parliamentarians, Policymakers and NGOs:

- **Ensure** that women are present during decision-making processes and develop practices to support a new generation of women taking up meaningful leadership positions that hold both relevance and power. Challenge the trend of placing women in 'cosmetic' leadership roles that hold little meaning or influence.
- **Encourage** women to bring their own identity and skills to politics and other leadership roles, rather than feeling pressure to emulate the behaviour of men.
- **Train** and support women parliamentarians to ensure they are equipped to address the challenges they are likely to face.
- **Advance** protections for parliamentarians to address the ongoing risk of physical and online abuse.
- **Focus** on reforms to education systems to create lasting changes to our political culture and to ensure that girls and boys are raised in a way that advances respect for all members of society. Teach young people at an early age to respect women's voices, not just those that follow established male behaviours.
- **Encourage** governments in the MENA region to enshrine labour rights for all workers. This includes the introduction of fully paid parental leave and recognising the rights of domestic labourers.
- **Advocate** for updated employment laws to reflect the new reality of flexible working. This includes protection of redundancy pay, holiday pay and parental leave.
- **Develop** national policies that make family work in the home paid to reduce the conflict between family and work commitments.
- **Increase** investments in public health to improve training and pay for women health workers.
- **Introduce** policy trackers so that the success or failure of government policies can be monitored.
- **Invest** in education and childcare, including early-years care, to provide the support that is needed. Encourage recognition of childminding as a profession and legislate for formal payment.
- **Guarantee** access to the internet for all. Treat Wi-Fi as a utility such as water and electricity that should reach all homes and communities.
- **Collect** more data on the economic impact of the pandemic on women and assess how much financial aid went to women.
- **Develop** clearer gender-disaggregated data and information to inform political responses, policies and strategies and shape inclusive post-Covid-19 economic recovery processes. Utilise this track to discover which policies are effective and what areas require improvement to ensure inclusive economic frameworks and long-term solutions. Identify data regarding the impact of the pandemic on refugees. Encourage greater collection of data regarding refugee and displaced communities globally.

- **Advance** arguments that present social care and public health policies as an investment in human capital, rather than a cost. Underline the economic impact of domestic violence and for economic recovery post-pandemic.
- **Improve** digital inclusion, skills and support to women owners of small business, recognising that the digital economy can support job creation and entrepreneurialism at a time where other sectors are contracting as a result of the economic impact of the virus.
- **Garner** written support for legislation preventing domestic abuse from across society, including religious leaders, to try and change perceptions on it at the grassroots level.
- **Encourage** governments to raise domestic violence legislation in Iraq as an issue on the international level, particularly if they are currently engaged in diplomatic relations and visits to Iraq.
- **Emphasise** that domestic abuse legislation concerns all, especially children.
- **Acknowledge** the psychological aspects of domestic abuse laws to tackle issues surrounding language. Work with experts to inform and raise awareness on television, social media and the internet to anticipate the issues that could arise and prepare society for the legislation.
- **Maintain** the provision of education for women and girls in Afghanistan. Online courses are a viable option based on previously existing appropriate and successful tested models, such as using CDs and Flash drives to record lessons and circulate them among communities. Insights gained from delivering remote education around the world during Covid-19 can be applied in this area.
- **Continue** delivering projects to support women in Afghanistan. However, as seen during the last period of Taliban rule, efforts must be under the radar to be effective. Large scale projects that attract public or media attention risk provoking a backlash from the Taliban, in a way that smaller grassroots campaigns might not.
- **Review** systems for asylum in individual states and create a temporary emergency visa that could be used in rapidly unfolding situations (such as a government's collapse). This would allow people with a genuine fear for their lives to escape to safety, without having to assemble a level of documentation which may not be viable in a situation of state collapse.

WPN Meetings



Acronyms

ACE	Adverse Childhood Experience
AFTD	Tunisian Association of Democratic Women
CGD	Centre for Global Development
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GWI	United States Secretary's Office for Global Women's Issues
HPF	Helsinki Policy Forum
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ILO	International Labour Organisation
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WEF	World Economic Forum
WHO	World Health Organisation
WPN	Women Parliamentarians Network
W20	Women 20

Part I:

How Has the Pandemic Impacted Women?

Women are acutely aware of the repercussions of the pandemic on the economy and workplace. The World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report 2021 noted that 'the pandemic is likely to have a scarring effect on future economic opportunities for women, risking inferior reemployment prospects and a persistent drop in income.'⁸ Women lost their jobs at a disproportionately higher rate than men during the pandemic; globally, women's employment dropped 5% between 2019 and 2020 (compared to 3.9% for men).⁹ Countries in the MENA region saw women's employment drop 4.1%, compared to 1.9% for men during this period.¹⁰ Sectors where women workers are particularly concentrated faced additional challenges. For example, during nationwide lockdowns at the beginning of the pandemic, domestic workers were asked to leave the home and were left without wages or accommodation.

Where women did maintain employment, their salaries were often substantially reduced. In Iraq, 27% of women surveyed reported working as usual during the pandemic (compared to 23% of men), however, women reported a greater loss of income.¹¹ This left many economically vulnerable when, as in Lebanon, their decline in salary was not matched with a corresponding increase in social support from the state, nor did it factor in the rapid depreciation of the Lebanese Lira. A World Health Organisation (WHO) report shows that 70% of those who work in the global health system are women, many of whom were on the front-line during emergency responses to Covid-19.¹² Despite being overrepresented in sectors impacted by the virus, for example in the health sector, when job-loss occurs, available job opportunities first go to men. Resetting financial approaches to ensure that national economies are inclusive of the needs of all citizens is essential not only for safeguarding the financial security of women, but for ensuring that the contributions of women benefit families, communities, and society as a whole.¹³

Childcare and social support

The increased burden of childcare disproportionately impacted women during the pandemic. Globally, it was reported that, on average, women spent 173 additional hours on unpaid childcare in the first 6 months of the pandemic, compared to 59 additional hours for men.¹⁴ This trend was similar for other unpaid domestic work, including teaching at home and caring for elderly members of the family. In the United States, 2.5 million women exited the labour market as a result of the pandemic, with many forced to choose

between their jobs and providing adequate care for loved ones. In the MENA region, many countries offered no support for domestic workers, and maternity pay does not exist. It was noted that the formal economy cannot exist without labour provided by women, therefore domestic work within the home must be recognised and properly supported.

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the 'risks and vulnerabilities associated with the informal economy disproportionately affect women.'¹⁵ Women in informal labour markets are often marginalised in discourse and economic recovery models. This is particularly notable in the Gulf-MENA region, where research suggests that 68% of the population are employed in informal enterprises. It was argued that unless specific and targeted action is enacted to ensure that the fundamental social and economic rights of women, and indeed men, are safeguarded, they will continue to work without any social protection in the most vulnerable and lowest paid jobs.

Government support throughout the pandemic was mostly enacted without consideration of gender. For example, only 10% of economic, financial, or fiscal relief packages were gender sensitive, compared to 21% of labour market policies.¹⁶ Evidence has also shown that financial services were not as easily accessed by women; loan providers are less likely to risk capital for women and, when they do, will charge women higher rates for business loans.

Wider Challenges

In some contexts, the pandemic highlighted a so-called inequality of the meaning of home. For example, in Tunisia, small living environments meant there was little space to work during lockdowns, and connectivity issues often meant that work and accessing education was not possible. If internet access was limited, it was often men who were prioritised and questions were raised about 'whose meeting was more important.' This had a particular impact during the pandemic when most education took place online.

Challenges were often shared across Europe and the Gulf-MENA region, however stark differences were also noted. In Libya, for example, responding to ongoing conflict was prioritised over the pandemic. Simultaneously, however, challenges associated with the pandemic did emerge. Corruption increased and the already weak education system was badly affected.

While the challenges relating to the pandemic are clear, there is still a lack of data relating to the impact of Covid on women, as well as displaced and refugee communities. Without clear data, pushing for reform and change becomes distinctly more challenging.

Opportunities Emerging from the Pandemic

Amidst clear and complex challenges, positive developments for women were also noted. Across most contexts in Europe and the Gulf-MENA region, governments did provide financial and social support which benefitted women. In Ireland, for example, sick leave was made a statutory right. Increased digitalisation during the pandemic also opened doors for many people, including women. Where the infrastructure was available, digital connectivity enabled some women to generate additional income during the pandemic. In Turkey, for example, women worked collectively to create products that can be sold online.

Flexible working throughout the pandemic was a welcome development for many women, however, the challenges of dysconnectivity with colleagues were also difficult to navigate. The recognition that effective working from home is possible reduced some of the burdens that many women face by providing greater flexibility to balance home and work commitments. However, there is a need to update legislative protections to ensure that the newfound workplace flexibility is not used as an excuse to reduce workers' rights and entitlements for women.

In the post-pandemic context, it is likely that governments will face fiscal constraints and reduce spending. NGOs, policymakers, and parliamentarians should therefore focus on communicating messages that highlight the importance of care work and underline that unpaid work, so often carried out by women, is fundamental for the growth of nations. This will contribute to a shift in discourse even if fiscal space remains limited in the short-term, thereby ensuring that when greater spending is possible it is channelled in the right direction.

Economic models that view public health, education, and childcare as 'costs' in comparison with infrastructure and transport as 'investments' need to be radically transformed. Instead, governments and international financial institutions must take a people-centred approach that views the impact on life as a central priority. This will mean that when financial constraints exist, public health and education will be prioritised, rather than reduced or eliminated.

Governments and decision makers must focus on how weaknesses can continue to be recognised and addressed in a post-pandemic context, with particular attention paid to the impacts on women.

Part II:

Rising Domestic Abuse

The UN estimates that 736 million women worldwide have been sexually assaulted in their life, much of which is perpetrated by a husband, former husband or an intimate partner.¹⁷ This challenge was compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic, during which domestic abuse increased globally. In Europe, calls to domestic violence helplines increased by 60% at the beginning of the pandemic, a trend that was reflected globally. Shelters provided by Tunisian feminist activists from the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) received 350 women a week during the lockdown, marking a four-fold increase in comparison to before the lockdown.¹⁸

The WPN includes women from countries that have and do not have domestic violence legislation and participants highlighted that meetings could enable them to share best practice regarding how legislation could be altered or developed. In Iraq, there is no specific legislation aimed at addressing domestic violence and participants from Iraq approached the Network for support, highlighting that the current context could be an opportunity to begin addressing this challenge.

A series of case studies were examined by the WPN to deepen understanding of challenges faced, and this approach demonstrated notable impact. For instance, it was announced on the 21st of December 2020 that Lebanon's Parliament had endorsed a new law criminalising sexual harassment, representing a landmark moment. Those drafting the law explained that they had benefited from the insights and experiences shared in WPN meetings. If upheld, this new legislation can see perpetrators spend up to four years in prison, with fines reaching up to 50 times the minimum wage. The law also offers protection to victims and witnesses who testify against the accused.

Government and Legislative Responses

Legislation on domestic violence is of utmost importance for raising the prominence of the issue at the national level, creating mechanisms for holding citizens to account, and protecting victims. The UN estimates that 155 countries have laws on domestic violence, however this does not guarantee that legislation meets international standards or is upheld in practice.¹⁹ One of the main issues raised in the Network was the failure of domestic violence legislation to truly address the extent of the issue.

Where legislation does not exist and there is resistance against its introduction, it is important to engage in dialogue to understand the reasons for opposition and to develop constructive means of moving forward. A lack of legislation makes gathering data that reveals the extent of domestic abuse very challenging and leads to poor cooperation between the government and local women's rights organisations, which complicates establishing shelters and accommodation for survivors of domestic abuse. The Network found that, across regions, alternative approaches, such as focusing on the economic impact of domestic abuse, had often been necessary to gain support for domestic violence legislation from those who opposed it.

Shared Insights from the UK and Gulf-MENA Region

The UK

The Rt Hon Theresa May MP, former Prime Minister of the UK, was at the forefront of advancing a new Domestic Abuse Bill in the UK. In her work, she found that highlighting the negative economic impact of domestic abuse was a persuasive means of gaining support for the legislation.²⁰ One of the main arguments put forward was that reducing domestic violence is not only an urgent matter of justice, but it also represents sound economics. For example, the UK Home Office estimated that the cost of domestic abuse in 2017 alone was £66 billion, with the greatest cost pertaining to the physical and emotional harm suffered by the victims themselves, at around £47 billion a year.²¹ Although data on the economic impact of domestic abuse in the Gulf-MENA region remains unknown, it was recognised that this argument would similarly be likely to hold relevance.

Language has a significant impact on how domestic violence legislation is perceived. Framing laws within the context of domestic abuse, rather than simply violence against women emphasises that everyone is threatened by violence and that the legislation will protect the rights of all, including men, children, and the elderly. It also tackles the complaint that such legislation disempowers men.

Lebanon

Lebanon witnessed a widespread increase in domestic violence during the pandemic. The country was plagued by Covid-19 and the ramifications of a collapsing economy, political crisis and the explosion on 4th August 2020, were felt deeply.²² Cases of domestic violence were already rising during the months of isolation, however, it was predicted that cases were likely to increase with a large sector of the population living below the poverty line - 74% compared to 28% in 2019.²³

A domestic violence law was enacted in Lebanon in 2014, however it has failed to ensure that the fundamental rights of women are protected. The legislation itself is very narrowly defined and is often not implemented, mirroring experiences in other parts of the region such as Jordan. Complications are furthered as there is no cohesive civil code in Lebanon, meaning that legal issues such as divorce, child custody and property rights are 'governed by 15 separate sectarian courts that rule overwhelmingly in favour of men.'

²⁴

In December 2020, Lebanon succeeded in broadening domestic violence to include relationships outside of marriage, a significant step in recognising that domestic violence is not limited to marital relations. Lebanon was also in the process of penalising sexual harassment, an issue that impacts women in the private of the home as well as in the public sphere, including the workplace. New legislation in Lebanon utilises protection order reviews similar to a bill in the UK that asserted the abuser is to leave the home during an investigative process.

Jordan

Jordan was one of the first countries in the Gulf-MENA region to pass a law on domestic violence, enacting legislation in 2008. Nevertheless, multiple loopholes have been found and implementation has proven difficult, with few cases being reported. The pandemic exacerbated the urgency to review legislation and policymakers were actively working towards repealing certain articles of Jordanian law.

It is recognised that many women who encounter violence within the household, whether physical, psychological, financial, or emotional, will not escape their abuser if it would result in leaving their children in danger. In 2020, legislators in Jordan were working to pass an article that enabled women to remain in the family home once they report domestic violence to the police. This was yet to materialise, as there were many aspects to be incorporated, such as ensuring that the victim of abuse is able to keep her possessions, and guaranteeing that, if she does have to leave, she is able to keep her children with her.

Jordanian policymakers stated that they needed assistance to liaise with civil society or to provide better services and assurances that, in the event that a victim of abuse is forced to leave her home, she will receive a separate home for her-

self and her children, free from any threat. There are safe houses that are managed by the Ministry for Social Development and the Second Union of Jordanian Women. However, further involvement from civil society is necessary to tackle these issues. There was also an urgent need to pass laws that protect those who report incidents of domestic abuse. The absence of such frameworks deters people from coming forward and reporting such crimes.

Engagement between parliamentarians from cross Europe and the Gulf-MENA region can raise awareness of practical strategies to ensure that laws are implemented effectively to safeguard the rights of domestic violence victims. There is a need to identify, support, recognise and advise victims of abuse as early as possible to ensure they receive the help they need. This includes connecting victims with the relevant social services and other law-making authorities. It is important to also engage men in these processes so that they also champion the fundamental human rights of women.

The role of the judiciary is crucial in the application of legislation. Questions have been raised regarding whether judges in Jordan are able to apply laws without the interference of public opinion and without the influence of often deeply patriarchal cultural norms and structures. While many countries such as Jordan are adopting education programmes for judges to help them better understand and deal with sensitive cases, this requires more attention. Jordan has developed special chambers tasked with dealing exclusively with domestic violence cases, however there are still no women judges, a pressing issue that needs to be reformed as it does not reflect Jordanian society.

Iraq

Due to protracted conflict in many parts of Iraq, with destitution and poverty still gripping the country, violence against women has not been a priority for policymaking. Although the Iraqi constitution explicitly prohibits 'all forms of violence and abuse in the family', only the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has a law on domestic violence.²⁵ Iraq's criminal code, which also applies in the Kurdistan region, criminalises physical assault but does not explicitly mention domestic violence. A husband has a legal right to 'punish' his wife, while parents have the legal right to discipline their children 'within limits prescribed by law or custom.'²⁶ There are also exemptions within the penal code, such as cases that classify under the umbrella of 'honourable motives.'

Despite this, there are two sets of domestic violence legislation being discussed in national politics: one presented by Iraqi MPs and policymakers, and another by the President's office. Since 2010, legislation on domestic violence in Iraq has been presented to parliament twice. Each time, it has been rejected on the grounds that it contradicts Sharia Law and the role of the family within Iraqi society. While many, including judges, academics, MPs, religious leaders, and civil society, are willing to support domestic violence legislation verbally, they have failed to do so when voting or influencing public opinion. Support in writing from religious leaders and those who are in favour the bill would be one way to

counter this. However, issues remain as MPs who support the legislation believe they will face a backlash from their constituents if they endorse it publicly. Often, a distorted picture of the legislation creates fear, and legislation on domestic violence will not pass until the public perception of the issue changes. Alongside a push from civil society, written support could help to change public opinion and generate greater momentum.

Custom and tradition are extremely important within Iraqi society, thus a grassroots campaign may be the most effective means of creating change. While it is important to have the affirmation from leading figures, it was noted that efforts must be made on a local level to show that domestic violence is not acceptable within communities and is extremely harmful. This must happen alongside legislation so that the population is ready to support the bill when it comes to vote. Civil society can play a role in creating this change but should do so while mindful that there is suspicion that it is influenced by a so-called foreign agenda. Through mobilising the community, public opinion may change, and this will influence political decision making. Mobilising civil society will also keep domestic violence on the agenda in the future and will prevent it from becoming a bipartisan issue.

Educating Lawmakers and the Police

Internationally, law enforcement often fails women by discrediting their claims, not taking reports seriously, failing to implement measures that do exist, or through general systemic corruption. It was argued that there is a growing necessity to educate judges, police, and parliamentarians to tackle the unconscious bias that often leaves women having to prove that they are victims, rather than the abuser proving that they did not commit a crime.

Scottish parliamentarians underscored the importance of retraining the police force to challenge preconceived ideas about domestic violence. Previously, crimes such as burglary were considered a higher priority. However, through various training programmes in both the trauma associated with domestic violence as well as in Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), this perception has been challenged, enabling the police to respond more rapidly to incidents of domestic abuse.

Children and Education

Education is one of the most important tools policymakers can utilise to prevent domestic violence. Young people must understand the issue of domestic abuse so that they are aware that violence in all its forms is unacceptable. Equity among all people, including gender equality, should be incorporated within curriculums with particular reference to violence against girls and women.

Children are the biggest victims when they are exposed to abuse within their household. Studies have shown that young people who grow up in these adverse conditions are more likely to experience toxic levels of stress which could

lead to smoking, drug abuse, obesity and other challenging health issues that can lead to premature death.²⁷ Aside from physical ailments, they are at high risk of psychological implications, including trauma and long-term mental health issues. Linking back to the cost of domestic abuse, individuals with ACEs face additional barriers to contributing productively to their societies and economies.

Media engagement can be a tool for tackling domestic abuse. In Turkey, celebrities took part in a national campaign aimed at combating domestic violence across the country. Many of the celebrities who participated in the initiative were themselves survivors of domestic violence and were able to communicate to the public that the actions they faced were unacceptable.

Despite progress in the drafting and codifying of legislation on domestic violence, implementation remains a key challenge for women parliamentarians everywhere. Many laws that aim to address domestic abuse have loopholes and it was understood that the WPN should continue to ensure that parliamentarians are supported as they navigate legislative processes and implementation periods. Continued discussion on best practices, success stories, personal experience, and ways of challenging opposition within the Network were encouraged.

Obstacles to legislation

Policymakers and activists engaged in passing legislation encountered intense opposition. In Iraq, domestic violence legislation has the support of religious leaders from the main sects, including the religious establishment at Najaf. However, there are hard-line conservatives who argue that legislation on domestic violence will fragment the traditional Iraqi family and disempower men. They believe that it contravenes Sharia and deviates from religion, although similar legislation has been passed in other countries that follow Sharia.

The Iraqi constitution stipulates that all laws should be within the jurisprudence of Sharia and MPs working on the bill are certain that their legislation does not challenge Sharia, nor the Iraqi constitution. They further argue that Sharia does not allow any form of violence and that there are Quranic verses as well as Islamic sayings and teachings that condemn violence. From this perspective, the Sharia argument against domestic abuse legislation is perceived to be an excuse to oppose measures that will uphold and safeguard the rights of women and women's advancement in society, rather than to promote Sharia. There is a perception that many lawmakers appear to be afraid of change and see protective measures for women as a challenge to the status-quo. Women legislators in Iraq emphasise that Sharia is peaceful and does not tolerate violence.

The perception of legislation on domestic violence as contravening traditional societal values is also present in Turkey. Amidst rising cases of domestic violence, with over 300 women murdered in 2020 and another 171 found dead in suspicious circumstances,²⁸ Turkey's withdrawal from the Is-

tanbul Convention in March 2021 has raised concern among Parliamentarians. This comes at a time in which there has been a spike in cases of domestic violence due to lockdown with many women, girls and children trapped at home with their abusers, many of whom do not have access to support services and social safety nets. No other state has withdrawn from this convention, which was launched in 2011 and entered into force in 2014²⁹; the withdrawal was made on the premise that the treaty encouraged divorce, homosexuality and undermines traditional values.³⁰

In response to the accusation that domestic violence legislation will fragment families, proponents can argue that domestic violence itself fragments families. Domestic abuse can impact whole communities and has a psychological impact that specifically effects children and carries implications for the future prosperity of a country. As many countries in the Gulf-MENA region have passed legislation on domestic violence - Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Bahrain - it can be argued that countries that do not possess such legislation are falling behind. If such laws are shown to be successful in other Arab and Muslim countries, the argument that it goes against Sharia and religion loses significance.

Child marriage

Child marriage remains a significant global challenge and deserves greater international attention. UNICEF estimates that around 25 million underage marriages were avoided in the past decade, however, the effects of the pandemic are likely to revert such progress. Prior to the pandemic, it was thought that 100 million girls would enter into child marriages over the next decade, but it is now estimated that a further 10 million will be forced into underage marriage due to increased poverty, the loss of jobs, closure of schools and isolation from support networks.³¹ If these estimates are correct, this will represent the greatest surge in child marriage rates in 25 years and will likely fuel poverty rates, as well as long-term health risks.³² As a result, members of the WPN were eager to draw greater attention to addressing this pressing challenge.

Displaced Communities

Displaced and refugee communities are at great risk of increased domestic and sexual violence.³³ Syrian refugee women in Jordan have said that they are more afraid of domestic violence than of Covid-19.³⁴ The consequences of such violence are vast. Not only do they face immediate trauma and injury, but they are also at further risk of developing mental health issues, isolation, unintended pregnancies, underage marriage, sexually transmitted diseases and, in some regions, of contracting HIV.³⁵ With overcrowded camps and very little healthcare services, or in situations where refugees and IDPs are living outside of camps, it can be very difficult to seek assistance. There is also an added pressure of stigma and rejection from families and communities. Without adequate social safety nets, women and children who are subject to domestic abuse remain trapped in a vicious cycle and are vulnerable to more abuse with no one to turn to and few laws to protect them.

Part III:

The Changing Context for Women in Afghanistan

Women Parliamentarians focused on the challenges that women face in the international context and how they might provide support. Following the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan on 31 August 2021 and the Taliban's assumption of power, women and girls in the country have faced human rights violations and devastating challenges.

The Taliban has given few indications that it has changed over the last twenty years. Public executions have returned, and journalists have been tortured for attempting to report on the situation. Women are being systematically excluded from key institutions, and restrictions on their movement and education are once again in place. Important gains – such as efforts to limit child marriage and bans on the use of virginity tests – are at risk of being reversed. Furthermore, institutions once in place to help women in Afghanistan, such as family response units in police stations, the human rights commission and laws addressing violence against women no longer exist.

The return of the Taliban also exacerbated Afghanistan's existing challenges. The economy is on the verge of collapse, with the banking system frozen and ordinary people unable to withdraw money. This has impacted urban families particularly hard as they have no safety net to fall back on, in contrast to rural families who can often meet their immediate needs from the land. However, severe drought combined with the mass displacement of communities due to the rise in violence, has led to widespread food shortages across the country. Poverty and food insecurity are both rising sharply. In the health sector Covid-19, continues to ravage the country, with medical supplies running low in many hospitals. In all these challenges, women have additional vulnerabilities which mean they are hit hardest.

Given this context, the international community cannot afford to disengage from Afghanistan. The evidence is unambiguous – in today's globalised world, profound instability within a country will not stay within its borders and will eventually spread to neighbouring countries and the wider region. The people of Afghanistan must not be punished for the policies of the new government and the primary purpose of engagement must be to alleviate the humanitarian situation in the country. This can be done effectively through established mechanisms via the United Nations or NGOs still on the ground in the country.

The situation in Afghanistan raised broader questions about international development and support for women's rights. Some argue that the current situation proved that the country's culture was never compatible with democratisation and efforts to empower women. However, it is a mistake to view culture as fixed – for example, 60 years ago coeducation was the norm in Afghanistan. Cultural norms can change but for this to happen it is vital to work with local communities to develop initiatives that are appropriate for the local context, rather than taking a top-down approach. For example, rather than viewing men or religious authorities solely as the problem, arguments should be developed that demonstrate to these groups that the empowerment of women is also in their interests. This can require moving at a gradual pace, but by building a wider base of support, can ensure that changes and reforms are more durable.

Part IV:

Addressing Structural Challenges and Strengthening Opportunities for Women

Alongside key issues related to domestic abuse and economic inclusion, the pandemic made unresolved structural challenges more visible. It illustrated limitations for women in leadership and illuminated that not enough attention has been paid to exploring how such barriers could be addressed. During meetings, participants expressed that attitudes, including a feeling of 'male entitlement' can significantly impact women's lives and the way in which women behave. For example, the degradation, threatening and harassment of women in public and online undermines feelings of self-worth and subsequently has a wider impact on the role of women in public life and on opportunities to advance progress.

Women parliamentarians in all societies are at acute risk of sexism, harassment, violence and threats to their lives. Such threats serve to disempower women and social media increases the risk of abuse of privacy and damage to reputation. A study compiled by the Council of Europe amongst parliamentarians focused on 123 women from 45 European countries and found that 85.2% of participants had encountered psychological abuse during their time in office. Furthermore, 46.9% had received death threats or threats of rape or beating.³⁶

In both Europe and the Gulf-MENA region there is an understanding that if women are to reach positions of power, they must emulate the behaviours of men. Women are taught to be more like men to be successful, however, if societies are to benefit from the unique skills and approach of women through their inclusion at the decision making table, they must be able to act authentically and not follow a predetermined mould. In fact, research shows that encouraging people from all backgrounds and groups to take up leadership positions while utilising their own experiences and skills develops better policy and more successful companies and challenges societal norms.

Furthermore, in a society where misogyny is engrained, women are taught that opportunities for success are limited and are encouraged to compete and undermine, rather than support, each other. This can result in women holding each other back. When women are taught that if they are to be strong and ambitious they need to go alone, opportunities for progress toward common goals through collaborative coalitions are undermined. By contrast, men are understood to have an implicit workplace support network that women are yet to develop. There are success stories of how cross-party cooperation significantly improved gender

equality, for example in Finland; such experiences should be shared widely.

'The Authority Gap'

During the final meeting of 2021, the WPN met for a discussion with Mary Ann Sieghart to discuss her book, *The Authority Gap*. The Authority Gap refers to the structures and unconscious biases that lead to women being taken less seriously than their male counterparts. During the discussion, women parliamentarians shared their common experiences of feeling undermined and undervalued throughout their work. The Authority Gap can manifest itself in many different ways; women are more likely to be interrupted in meetings, more likely to have their expertise questioned, more likely to be patronised and more likely to have their views ignored or marginalised. At events, women will often find people turning to their spouses or partners, and in some cases for example, assuming that they are the head of the delegation. Many continue to have an inbuilt assumption that when a man asserts something he is correct until disproved, whereas a woman will find her statements more readily challenged.

Opportunities for Progress

Training and skills-development programmes can help women to counter such influences and, crucially, build confidence. Women must be encouraged to speak out and not be intimidated to ask questions. They must also have opportunities to develop skills to counter behaviour aimed at undermining their position. Men must also speak out and support women because when women are left to argue a case alone the challenges grow significantly. Rather than taking opportunities from them, men must realise that improved opportunities for women will simultaneously benefit men. Patriarchal structures encourage practices such as arranged marriage, and men must be part of the solution if such practices are to be addressed.

Education of young people is of central importance when considering how such challenges could be addressed in the long-term. Research has shown a disparity in how boys and girls are treated in educational settings, with examples highlighting how young boys are raised to be confident in their abilities, while the capacities of young girls are questioned.

This results in women feeling as though their success is due to hard work rather than simply believing in themselves and their capabilities; this has long-term impacts on confidence and the roles women take up in later life.

The Role of Women in Political Decision

Making

Covid-19 has highlighted the enduring under-representation and exclusion of women from decision making. Only 26.1% of parliamentary seats and 22.6% of ministerial positions are held by women globally,³⁷ and a lack of women's voices at the heart of decision-making has direct implications on which issues are prioritised and where resources are allocated. Since 2020, the Political Empowerment Gender Gap, monitored by the World Economic Forum (WEF), has widened by 2.4 percentage points and the WEF estimates that it will take another 145.5 years to reach gender parity in politics.³⁸ This pattern could be repeated in the global response to Covid-19, with the perspective and demands of women marginalised in governmental responses.

Members of the network have stressed that, even when women are at the table, they often find it difficult to have their voices heard. Women parliamentarians have also found that when women's issues are raised, politicians halt the discussions by claiming that they have more serious issues and priorities, such as security and economics. This happened in Lebanon in October 2021, when one women parliamentarian proposed that there should be a quota of 26 women MPs within parliament. The amendment was not debated as male parliamentarians argued that there was no time for such discussions.³⁹

Parliaments in Europe and the Gulf-MENA region also often fail to support women parliamentarians who have children. This limits the participation of women in decision making. Women parliamentarians reported having to hide both their pregnancy and birth to keep working. Others highlighted that structures are not in place to assist a balance between parenting and carrying out official duties such as voting which, in many parliaments, takes place in person. In Ireland, discussions are ongoing to formalise measures supporting senior women parliamentarians who have had to take leave from Parliament in the past.

Women parliamentarians have often benefited from the introduction of quotas to ensure female representation in decision making. Their experience suggests that quotas work well in proportional representation electoral systems, but are less effective in first-past-the-post systems without action at the selection level. In a first-past-the-post system all-women shortlists have been deployed for selection in safe seats to ensure a greater representation of women candidates in the elected parliament. It was through this method that former Prime Minister Rt Hon Theresa May was elected as an MP in the UK.

In Finland, although there are no quotas, four of the five main political party leaders are women, and the Prime Minister is a woman. The Finnish electoral system is proportional and totally preferential, however, the country does have an equality law that requires government boards and municipal councils to have 40% representation of the less-represented sex. This has paved the way for many women to take up decision making positions.

However, the current composition of Finnish party leaders and gender balance in government could change if the current government is replaced by a conservative one in the future. Broader challenges for women still remain; for example, the time when a woman is particularly electable in politics is short and dependent on the perceived attractiveness and youthfulness of a candidate. Once a woman reaches a certain age, she may be considered too old. Furthermore, in Iraq where a quota for women parliamentarians is in fact in place, it is predominantly women parliamentarians who raise issues affecting women, such as domestic violence. Ongoing challenges highlight that political representation is not a 'silver bullet' for amplifying women's voices and creating widespread necessary change that will benefit women and wider society.

Background to the Women Parliamentarian Network

In 2017, women parliamentarians involved in the Helsinki Policy Forum (HPF) requested a space for women parliamentarians in the Gulf-MENA region and Europe to meet and explore issues of common interest. They sought a mechanism for inclusive dialogue for women parliamentarians of varying religious beliefs and political affiliations to come together to share best practices and advice, build relationships, identify policy recommendations, and strengthen regional cooperation through addressing mutual challenges. Amidst a general lack of information sharing within the Gulf-MENA region and externally with Europe, a network would facilitate an open environment for frank exchange on potentially contentious issues, such as domestic violence and laws on inheritance.

In response to this need, the Women Parliamentarian Network (WPN) was established as an integral part of the HPF by the Finnish Foreign Minister in 2018 at the margins of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). At this inaugural meeting, participants noted it was the first time they were in such a meeting where the majority of participants were women. It was suggested that a regular forum between women parliamentarians from across the regions would offer a unique space in which women parliamentarians could identify impediments to their political, economic and social inclusion and explore how barriers could be addressed through legislative change.

Since then, the Network has held meetings on a range of topics from domestic abuse legislation, to increasing the inclusion of women in the post-Covid-19 economic recovery. In November 2021, the Network met in-person for the first time, providing the opportunity to discuss all issues in greater depth, consolidate relationships and set the upcoming agenda for the Network.

The Network is comprised of women parliamentarians – or an equivalent body – from across the Gulf-MENA region, Europe, and, more recently following recommendation from members of the Network, the United States. High-level women officials and experts from international institutions such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), Women 20 (W20), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations (UN) and the G20 are also engaged.

Parliamentarians represent both governing and opposition parties and come from religious and secular backgrounds, thereby ensuring that discussions are reflective of the diversity of the regions involved. Participation is on an invitation only basis, and includes former prime ministers, former Under-Secretary Generals of the United Nations, women ministers and parliamentary committee chairs, as well as government officials working in relevant areas. Thus far, participating countries have included Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Sweden, Tunisia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

At the outbreak of Covid-19, the WPN's events moved online, thereby allowing a greater participation from the regions. This report details the online meetings convened by the network throughout 2020 and 2021 and highlights the main challenges and opportunities that women parliamentarians have faced throughout the pandemic. The report also provides practical recommendations for policymakers.

The focus of meetings held throughout the pandemic was driven by the impact of Covid-19, particularly on women. For example, one lesson learned from the Ebola crisis was that men were able to re-join the workforce at a faster rate than women after the crisis; members of the Network thereby suggested that the group focus on women's participation in the post-Covid-19 economic recovery. In response to increased domestic abuse that was heralded by the pandemic, discussions focused on domestic abuse and included the Rt. Hon. Theresa May, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, sharing the draft legislation that was being debated in the House of Commons. These two themes emerged and became the focus of WPN sessions.

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