

Virtual Meeting of Commonwealth Ministers for Women’s Affairs

and Gender and Development on COVID-19, Thursday 3 September

# Commonwealth Trade Union Group briefing note

The Commonwealth Trade Union Group (CTUG) represents over 70 million members in over 40 Commonwealth countries, including tens of millions of women workers. Women lead trade union movements as Presidents or General Secretaries in Australia, Barbados, India, New Zealand, Singapore South Africa and the United Kingdom.

This note sets out our main proposals in the areas which will be discussed by Ministers. Further information is available, for example [this blog](https://medium.com/%40SharanBurrow/we-owe-frontline-women-workers-the-recognition-of-equal-pay-6148833383f5) by ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow, [this resolution](https://perc.ituc-csi.org/PERC-Women-s-Committee-Resolution-on-Crisis-COVID-19) from the ITUC’s Pan European Regional Council women’s committee, [this briefing](https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/a_new_social_contract_-_crisis_-_recovery_-_resilience_en.pdf) on the move from crisis to recovery to resilience and this resource page with [union responses](https://www.ituc-csi.org/union-responses-to-gender-based) to gender-based violence in the context of the pandemic.

# Gender and COVID19

Women have been hit hard by the pandemic: they are more concentrated in the jobs which involve exposure to the virus (nursing, care and cleaning) as well as those occupations most likely to have been hurt by the economic impact – eg retail, travel and hospitality, and personal services, and in the informal sector jobs which account for 60% of employment worldwide; they have borne the brunt of caring for children displaced from education; and they have faced particular problems with personal protective equipment designed by and for men, even where it is provided to them. The pandemic has shone a profound spotlight on inequality in the labour market.

# Gender-based violence

Even before the pandemic, [global figures](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5006) concerning domestic violence were horrific. Necessary emergency responses to the pandemic have exacerbated this crisis as lockdowns have often left them trapped with their abuser, unable to access refuges that have faced growing underfunding. For many workers, home has now become the workplace. But home may be where they are most at risk of violence.

# Climate change

Climate change affects women particularly, especially those in rural work. Women often lack the resources needed to cope with the destruction resulting from extreme weather events due to climate change. With the UN COP postponed until 2021, there is an urgent need for Commonwealth countries to develop their Nationally Defined Contributions under the Paris Accord and commit to the urgently needed just and equitable transition of the economy required to avoid catastrophic climate chaos. We need to climate and employment proof our workplaces, but action is needed globally to ensure a new green deal is implemented in ways that accelerate equality.

# Building back better

The Commonwealth Charter makes clear the importance of fairness and equality. They are values we need to put into practice through instruments from global regulation to collective bargaining. Endemic pay inequality, the absence of adequate minimum living wages, exclusion from social protection systems, undervalued and underpaid work, as well the disproportionate share of unpaid care work done by women in the care economy, all need changing as we seek to recover and create a resilient economy based on a new social contract and a universal labour guarantee, especially for working women, as the best way to achieve the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.

# What women workers want – nine key points

1. More funding for quality public services, especially health, social services, care and education, but also water and sewerage, and to ensure accessibility for all
2. Greater priority on employment in the care sector, in particular higher wages, action to reduce insecurity, and adequate personal protective equipment
3. Health and safety to become a fundamental right at work, recognising gender and intersectional aspects
4. Commonwealth countries ratifying and implementing ILO Convention 189 on rights for domestic workers
5. A global fund for social protection ensuring unemployment pay, adequate sick pay from day one, and decent pensions, all extended to cover women workers who may have interrupted employment records and endemic low pay
6. Commonwealth countries joining the Equal Pay International Coalition (EPIC), and discussing measures to implement equal pay with social partners
7. Commonwealth countries ratifying and implementing ILO Convention 190 on violence and harassment in the world of work, which has a strong focus on gender-based violence
8. A greater voice and representation for working women in decision making, and mandatory systems of due diligence to prevent discrimination and exploitation in global supply chains
9. A new, reformed multilateralism providing global coherence and solidarity and new or strengthened global rules and standards