Gender Equality in Public Administration: A New Normal for Governments Three Years into the Pandemic

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Women's full and effective participation in public administration is the bedrock of the whole-of-government approach to gender equality. Accumulating global evidence suggests gender equality in public administration enhances government functioning, the responsiveness and effectiveness of service delivery, and trust in public institutions, strengthening the relationship between Governments and the publics they represent and serve.[2] Recognizing the importance of gender equality across all levels and sectors of public administration, countries committed to realizing this goal within the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to measuring progress towards its achievement as articulated in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicator 16.7.1. However, by 2020, only one third of the world's countries were at or near gender parity at decision-making levels in public administration; on average, women comprised 46 per cent of public administration employees but only 31 per cent of the top leaders and 30 per cent of the senior managers.[3]

As has occurred during other major crises, the pandemic revealed and even exacerbated pre-existing gender inequalities. For instance, the pandemic drew attention to the dearth of women in public health leadership. Women make up 70 per cent of the health-care workforce and were disproportionately represented on the front lines of early COVID-19 response, but in public health administration women account for only 34 per cent of the decision makers.[4] Watchdog groups suggest that the pandemic may have worsened gender disparities in public health leadership,[5] despite the widely publicized successes attributed to women national leaders in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 and saving lives.[6]

Periods of crisis destabilize existing institutional structures and create new leadership possibilities. During the recent pandemic, however, Governments often missed opportunities to promote women. One example is the failure to include women equitably on COVID-19 task forces (executive branch institutions designed to lead government pandemic responses). In 2021, men made up 76 per cent of COVID-19 task force members and held 78 per cent of the leadership positions.[7] Although the commitment to gender equality was sidelined in many countries, there were some notable exceptions; Saint Lucia, for example, formed a task force with equal numbers of women and men in membership and leadership capacities.[8]

Times of crisis also create windows of opportunity for policy change.[9] To sustain operations during the pandemic, Governments implemented new or modified workplace policies for public employees. Countries such as the United

States of America expanded existing telework programmes, while others, such as the Philippines, Portugal, and Spain, adopted flexible work policies for public employees for the first time. The Philippines began allowing both remote work and flexible schedules, including the option of a four-day workweek.[10] Given women's disproportionate share of care work and household labour, such policies were instrumental in keeping women in the workforce during the pandemic, and they continue to be seen as useful policies for promoting work-life balance and institutional inclusiveness.

Adjusting to a "new normal" and refocusing on gender equality in public administration globally will require simultaneous efforts on three fronts: remembering lessons learned prior to the pandemic and re-energizing efforts to adopt and implement good practices; consolidating positive changes made during the pandemic; and taking bold action to regain momentum to achieve SDGs 5 and 16 by 2030.

On the first front, the following three areas assigned priority in pre-pandemic efforts should constitute key components of future policies and practices so that gender equality commitments can be met:

- *Data and transparency*. Immediate attention needs to be directed towards SDG indicator 16.7.1b, which aims to measure representation with regard to age, sex, disability status, and population group in positions of public institutions, including the public service, and to assess the correspondence between such representation and the proportions of those groups in society as a whole. Reporting on this indicator has the potential to expand gender-disaggregated data availability, target public administration sectors and levels that require additional attention, and improve cross-country learning. Sharing and integrating relevant data in a transparent and accessible job placement platform can increase government accountability. The Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Dashboard in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Sistema de Alta Dirección Pública (SADP) in Chile exemplify how quality public administration employment data can be integrated into transparent hiring and promotion practices to promote a diverse and inclusive public service.[11]

- *Training and mentorship*. Providing women with training and mentoring is important not only for upgrading skills and building capacities, but also for improving

the visibility of employees eligible for promotion and creating opportunities for networking.[12] Going forward, new leadership and managerial training programmes should prioritize women civil servants and other marginalized population groups. Effective examples of career development initiatives targeting women include the State Leads Equally (*Staten leder jämt*) programme in Sweden[13] and the Women in the Lead–Leadership, Engagement, Advancement and Development (W-LEAD) programme in Ireland.[14]

- *Targets and quotas*. Governments have adopted leadership-focused quotas, targets and temporary special measures to address the underrepresentation of women at senior levels of public administration. While their design must be carefully considered and their impact assessed, a number of examples can help guide forward-looking discussions, including the affirmative action plans targeting the promotion of women in the public sector and the gender binding targets included in the Federal Equal Treatment Act in Austria; the 2013 Sauvadet Law in France, which introduced a progressive 40 per cent quota for all nominations to top civil service positions; the Quota Law (Law 581 of 2000) in Colombia, which mandates a minimum of 30 per cent women in decision-making positions; and the 2019 "parity in everything" reform in Mexico, which establishes gender parity in all government sectors.

On the second front, positive changes adopted during the pandemic need to be carefully studied and intentionally integrated into future gender equality commitments in public administration. The gendered implications of flexible work arrangements, especially those involving telework exclusively, need to be first on the list.[15] As these arrangements are incorporated into the lives of public employees, they stand to have the most positive impact if gender equality concerns are intentionally integrated and mainstreamed through the development of the necessary infrastructure and the provision of training, information technology access, mechanisms for the evaluation of telework for promotion and retention purposes, and health and safety guidelines for home offices. Adaptability is important, as a flexible system that includes variable work hours or a hybrid system that combines telework with office work may be preferred to full-time telework.

Governments can promote gender equity in a telework environment by encouraging men to assume an equal share of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities, including "by means of targeted employee engagement and creative initiatives, such as role-modelling of good practices by male managers, social-media campaigns, internal blogs or photos, videos, etc.".[16] One example of positive role modelling comes from Japan; in the past, few men took advantage of their available paternity leave, but participation rose from 14 to 40 per cent in the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare after former minister Yasuhisa Shiozaki publicly identified himself as a man who took part in caring for his children.[17]

In order to ensure that the benefits of virtual and hybrid work environments can be accessed by everyone equally, public institutions need to invest in managerial training to intentionally cultivate a leadership approach characterized by greater gender awareness and equity and more balanced representation.[18] Efforts such as those undertaken in Spain, where human resource managers and other key administrators are offered an advanced 25-hour gender equality training course–can strengthen managerial buy-in to gender equality.[19]

With the growing social and economic pressures surrounding the COVID-19 crisis, mental health emerged as an urgent priority in many settings–including the public sector. Latvia and the Netherlands, for example, began offering mental health services in response to the increased emotional burden placed on public servants during the pandemic.[20] This heightened focus on the mental well-being of public administration employees should be made a permanent feature of government employment. Mental health support, while increasing the appeal of public employment for all, could be especially beneficial for women employees, who have reported higher levels of stress linked to managing their work-life balance within the context of flexible work arrangements. Targeted action in areas such as these contribute to gender equality in the long term.

On the third front, bold action must be taken to get countries back on track to meet sustainable development objectives. To restore the momentum needed to reach SDGs 5 and 16 by 2030, decision makers must put gender equality at the centre of present and future recovery efforts. The COVID-19 pandemic served to re-emphasize the reality that even in sectors where women constitute the majority of workers and serve on the front lines, they are not included equally in policy development and decision-making. Moving forward, it is crucial that women be fully integrated into permanent bodies of crisis response and management across all sectors.

Endnotes

1   Müge Finkel and Melanie Hughes serve as Co-Directors of the Gender Inequality Research Lab (GIRL). Dr. Finkel is the Director of the Ford Institute for Human Security and Assistant Professor of International Development at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh. Dr. Hughes is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh.

2   For a review, see Müge K. Finkel, Melanie M. Hughes and Joanna Hill, *Gender Equality in Public Administration* (United Nations Development Programme and University of Pittsburgh, 2021), pp. 45-47, available at https://www.undp.org/publications/global-report-gender-equality-public-administration.

3   Ibid., p. 7.

4   Ibid., p. 15.

5   Roopa Dhatt, "Women in Global Health: 2023 policy priorities", Women in Global Health, 18 January 2023, available at https://womeningh.org/aiming-high-in-2023-and-not-compromising-on-gender-equity-in-health/.

6   Paola Profeta, "Gender equality and public policy during COVID-19", *CESifo Economic Studies*, vol. 66, No. 4 (2020), p. 371.

7   This figure does not include the 4 per cent of task forces co-led by women and men. See UNDP, UN Women and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker, version 2 (11 November 2021), available at https://data.undp.org/gendertracker/ (database accessed on 20 January 2023).

8   Ibid.

9   Michael Mintrom and Jacqui True, "COVID-19 as a policy window: policy entrepreneurs responding to violence against women", *Policy and Society*, vol. 41, No. 1 (March 2022), p. 143, available at https://academic.oup.com/policyandsociety/article/41/1/143/6513362.

10 Gender Inequality Research Lab (GIRL), "Gender equality in public administration in the COVID-19 era: a global assessment of women's access to decision-making positions and gender-sensitive policy responses", GEPA Working Group mid-year presentation to UNDP colleagues, 18 November 2020, available at https://www.girl.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/gepa_and_covid19_nov_18_presentation.pdf.

11 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Women, Government and Policy Making in OECD Countries: Fostering Diversity for Growth* (OECD Publishing, 2014), p. 71, available at https://www.oecd.org/gov/women-government-and-policy-making-in-oecd-countries-9789264210745-en.htm; United Kingdom, Civil Service and Cabinet Office, "Guidance: Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Dashboard", 5 June 2018 (updated 10 May 2022).

12 Müge K. Finkel, Melanie M. Hughes and Joanna Hill, *Gender Equality in Public Administration*, p. 62.

13 OECD, *Women, Government and Policy Making in OECD Countries: Fostering Diversity for Inclusive Growth*, p. 73.

14 OECD, *OECD Toolkit for Mainstreaming and Implementing Gender Equality: Implementing the 2015 OECD Recommendation on Gender Equality in Public Life* (OECD Publishing, 2018), p. 82, available at https://www.oecd.org/gov/toolkit-for-mainstreaming-and-implementing-gender-equality.pdf; see also https://www.oecd.org/gender/governance/toolkit/.

15 See OECD, *Compendium des bonnes pratiques pour l'accès des femmes à des postes de décision dans la sphère publique* (forthcoming).

16 International Labour Organization, *Teleworking during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond: A Practical Guide* (Geneva, International Labour Office, July 2020), p. 19, available at https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/instructionalmaterial/wcms_751232.pdf.

17 Vasudha Gupta and others, "Accelerating gender parity: What can Governments do?", McKinsey and Company article, 28 January 2019, available at https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/accelerating-gender-parity-what-can-governments-do.

18 Hierarchical forms of leadership that have been effective in physical workspaces have been found to be less effective in some virtual work environments. In these contexts, relationship-oriented leadership approaches are increasingly recommended to managers. See Hanna de Vries, Lars Tummers and Victor Bekkers, "The benefits of teleworking in the public sector: reality or rhetoric?", *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, vol. 39, No. 4 (2019), pp. 570-593, available at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0734371X18760124.

19 OECD, *Fast Forward to Gender Equality: Mainstreaming, Implementation and Leadership* (Paris, OECD Publishing, 2019), p. 98, available at https://www.oecd.org/gov/fast-forward-to-gender-equality-g2g9faa5-en.htm.

20 GIRL, "Gender equality in public administration in the COVID-19 era: a global assessment of women's access to decision-making positions and gender-sensitive policy responses".