



# Empower women and see the change!

International Women's Day (8th March) is a global day to celebrate the social, economic, cultural, and political achievements of women – while calling for action in strengthening gender equality and accelerating women's empowerment.

On this day of the **International Women's Day 2021**, WFAD and our Gender Working Group wish to take the opportunity to commend this year's theme: "Women in Leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 World", which aims to commemorate the tremendous efforts by women and girls around the world "in shaping a more equal future and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and highlights the gaps that remain." (UN Women 2021)

**The WFAD reiterates** the need of women in leading positions, and on ramping up representation in all areas in which decisions are made, as a necessary and sustainable step towards achieving real global change. All awhile highlighting the issues faced by women, and multiple disadvantages in the era of COVID-19. An era which more than ever has shone a light on [underlying] structural gender inequalities. WFAD joins in on celebrating the leadership shown by women across the field.

## **Gender Inequality within Global Health**

For decades, global health has been led by men and delivered by women, which is reflected in the fact that women make up 70% of health care workforce but hold only one fourth of senior roles. These gaps in leadership are driven by power imbalances and discrimination, rendering women absent from national and global decision-making - not only within responses related to the current pandemic, but within other health and even drug-use responses at large. Furthermore, during the pandemic, health care workers, of which a vast majority are women, have struggled to remain safe in high-pressure work environments. We are now seeing severe shortages of staff, personal protective equipment, and a lack in access to rapid testing. As COVID-19 continues to strain, health care services and civil society, as well as important services including emergency housing and helplines, reach their capacity. Showcasing that more needs to be done to prioritise addressing these gendered imbalances among the frontline workers of the pandemic. In the words of UN Women: Everyone has a role to play!

### **Unequal impacts of COVID-19 on Society and Services**

The outbreak of COVID-19 highlights the unequal implications and impact of the virus, which differently affect varying groups within our societies. Minority communities have experienced higher incidences of the virus, ultimately shedding a light on the spatialised socio-economic inequalities and factors of vulnerability of cramped housing, as well as occupations that oftentimes cannot be performed from the home.

We have long known that crises hold disproportionate effect on women's health – and COVID-19 is no exception. Increasing reports show that all forms of violence against women and girls, particularly by relatives/partners, have intensified since the virus outbreak. This so-called "Shadow Pandemic", as it has been named by UN Women, is growing during the crisis. Similarly, while the instances of violence are increasingly growing, reports further show that access to services are being disrupted and safe shelters are full or closed.

Overall, the pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to society, and caused significant stress and anxiety in millions of people's lives. A main concern has been the impact of social isolation and disruption of treatment services and services for people in recovery from substance use dependence.

Therefore, WFAD takes this opportunity to address these urgent issues and relay our continued support to all women within our field – joining in the efforts toward eliminating inequalities faced by women in the fields of prevention, treatment, and recovery.

### **Women in Treatment and Recovery in the Covid-era.**

As so often, in times of crisis, certain groups are made more vulnerable to the consequences thereof. Two such groups being women using drugs, and women in recovery. "Women of the world want and deserve an equal future free from stigma, stereotypes, and violence; a future that's sustainable, peaceful, with equal rights, and opportunities for all. To get us there, the world needs women at every table where decisions are being made." So begins UN Women's statement to commemorate this year's International Women's Day. A statement which so easily translates into the world of drug policy. Within which, women's needs are often put aside. During the onset of the pandemic, services related to harm reduction, treatment, and recovery, faced similar issues/concerns as other frontline health services – some service providers were forced to close down or restrict access. Services working directly with clients needed to regroup and implement new sanitation and hygiene and social distancing measures. Civil society among others, have worked extremely hard to adapt to this new reality and finding new means. Some of which have been highlighted in our Recovery webinar. One common method has been the transformation to meeting online, which among other initiatives, led to opportunities to increase the female-only support sessions across the globe by the Narcotics Anonymous and other Recovery Organisations.

### **Commemorating the Strength of Women**

As Covid-19 is challenging systems in place, highlighting disparities within and between societies, we cannot forget to commemorate the women in the front lines of these services and the women on their journey of recovery. On this day, it is of utmost importance that we once again acknowledge gender-based needs in addiction prevention, treatment, and recovery!

We, as a society, must further evidence aimed at gender sensitive, specific and transformative options, to increase access to treatment and recovery services, meet the needs of women, while breaking barriers and promoting recovery. It is time to further recognise the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women and to ensure that gender specific needs of women and girls, including particular focus on the needs and involvement of indigenous women, minority women, women with disabilities, and the LGBTQI+ community, in all areas. While ensuring that appropriate and accessible, gender- and culturally sensitive care, and trauma informed treatment are offered.

Thus, this year, WFAD calls attention to the Women in Leadership. Not only in our Boards, our workplaces, and decision-making positions – but also encouraging and supporting women in the field, women who use drugs and women in recovery. While the current systems are shaken to their core by the pandemic, it provides opportunity for rethinking and building better and more just societies. By building on women's stories, their courage, and their progress, we as a society can change long-standing gender inequalities and protect and put the needs of women at the heart of every response.

