



# GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE HURRICANE RESILIENCE DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS



**COVID-19  
RESPONSE**

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Avoid. Reduce. Transfer. Assume. These terms are used to describe decisions we make in our daily lives about managing risk, including disaster risk. The impact of natural hazards is not only influenced by their intensity, but also by people's vulnerability, which is directly related to socio-economic factors influencing exposure and the ability to recover. These factors also include elements of gender inequality.

Many Caribbean countries are still in recovery mode from the impacts of environmental hazards, such as hurricanes and tropical storms, which caused more than US\$118 billion in damage and losses over the past 3 years (CDEMA, 2020). Against this backdrop, Caribbean countries and their people, women, men, boys and girls alike are now managing responses to the unprecedented 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), which has been described by the Honourable Mia Mottley, Chair of CARICOM and Barbados' Prime Minister, as "the most destabilizing event for our countries, probably since World War II," during a live CNN Interview on 29 April 2020.

Physical distancing and quarantine measures, curfews, border closures and virtual engagements have become paramount to saving lives and livelihoods as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. While these restrictions are critical in reducing the spread of COVID-19, they have had a detrimental impact on the Caribbean economy, citizen security and gender equality. Tourism, which contributes to more than 25% of most Caribbean countries' GDPs has stalled, a significant number of women who are the majority in the informal sector are now unemployed and, a stark increase in violence against women and children has been reported during the lockdown.

The extent of the socio-economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic has begun to shape the "new normal" for CARICOM Member States. A 1.5%

contraction of Gross Domestic Product has already been estimated by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2020). The disruption of international and regional supply distribution chains due to halts in manufacturing plants and business operations in tourism for example, will also result in significant shortages and/or increased cost of goods and materials, and further hits to economies across the Caribbean region.

While governments balance this "new normal," there is also an 'above-average' forecast for the 2020 Atlantic Hurricane Season, which takes place from June 1 to November 30. Two weeks before the official start of the Hurricane Season, *Tropical Storm Arthur*, the first named storm for 2020, forced authorities and communities to speed up their prevention and preparedness measures to prepare for impact.

In the face of these challenges, cost-effective prevention and preparedness measures are critical. Experience shows that gender-responsive prevention and preparedness leads to more effective local and national response and better management of infectious diseases. To this end, women's leadership and contributions are critical to curbing infection rates and enabling resilience and recovery.

## Strengthening Resilience in the Home

Women's essential role in household disaster preparedness is now even more critical. Data from various regulating bodies around the region has revealed that there is high demand for social assistance grants as result of increased unemployment rates caused by the COVID-19 crisis. Single-parent households that are headed by single mothers especially, will now also require support for the added

expense of hurricane preparedness supplies. Women and their families will need recourses to be able to purchase the recommended food items to withstand a hurricane impact. These must be non-perishable and stockpiled to last for at least a 2-week period.

Individuals must also prepare and test their *Family Disaster Plans*, taking into consideration public health safety measures. People may have to follow Government stipulated schedules for when they can leave home, wearing masks as they do so, as seen in the Bahamas and other countries. Apart from the normal supermarket and medication stock ups, they will also have to obtain necessary preparedness items from hardware stores before there is a run on these items and crowding in the stores. Individuals will also need to stock up on cleaning supplies and personal hygiene items to maintain household sanitation and personal care, which are already scarce in supply and/or unreasonably overpriced.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the demands of the “care economy” (paid and unpaid care and domestic work) have increased. Schools are physically closed, and parents are expected to work and support their children through online learning. These demands will continue and extend into the Hurricane Season. It is important for men to share the responsibilities of care and domestic work. In addition to the conflation of formal work and unpaid care work that families are experiencing, especially single mothers and fathers, one devastating weather event can exacerbate the ability of parents to provide care and resources for their children. Since most students are now enrolled in virtual classrooms, any one hurricane can result in the disruption of electricity and/or telecommunication services such as internet, which would also affect parents’ ability to work remotely. Therefore, Family Preparedness Kits should include not only important documents such as passports and immunization cards, but also educational material (secured in plastic)

to allow for the continuation of learning and active engagement of children.

## Strengthening Resilience in Communities

At the community level, gender-responsive early warning and early action are critical and can strongly contribute to enhanced community resilience and speedier recovery processes. Women play an important role as first responders and essential service workers in communities across the Caribbean region by engaging effectively in local response and recovery efforts. To support women’s local agency for disaster resilience and in an attempt to support communities in boosting resilience, the UN Women Multi Country Office – Caribbean (UN Women MCO) has trained numerous community disaster preparedness and response focal points/officials on gender-responsive prevention, preparedness and response over the past years.

The UN Women MCO has also contributed to mitigating the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis by rejuvenating women’s small and micro businesses and businesses with high female labor force through engaging tailors to produce hundreds of cloth masks in each of 13 CARICOM countries for victims of gender based violence (GBV). To accelerate economic recovery and build resilience to natural hazards, the UN Women MCO has also ensured that small grants are provided to female-headed households and marginalized workers whose livelihoods were impacted in the agriculture and tourism sectors through the Global Affairs Canada and UK DFID funded, and UNDP led ‘EnGenDER Project’.

While non-perishables are critical for food security during an active hurricane season, it is also important that fresh food remains available. In balancing

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budgets impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, households may be forced to purchase and consume less fresh fruits and vegetables. Often farmers, especially small holder farmers, experience significant wastage and loss of crops during the post-hurricane phase. In the Commonwealth of Dominica, the UN Women MCO supported the creation of a platform for four women farmer groups to advertise their weekly supply of fresh produce, receive direct orders from customers and enabled them to adhere to COVID-19 safe handling guidelines, thereby contributing to the safe provision of fresh food for local communities.

The challenging reality faced by many people within communities awaiting return to employment can also be used as an opportunity for them to become official volunteers and enroll in virtual training courses that are being hosted by National Disaster Offices. Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) and Damage and Needs Assessment (DANA) are courses that can be completed online to build community disaster response capacity.

## Strengthening Resilience as a Nation

Within recent times, there has been a drive for active women leadership in senior level disaster risk reduction (DRR) positions across the region. In fact, while there are more women than men working in public functions on DRR in the Caribbean, women's leadership in senior management positions continues to be underrepresented. This is of particular concern given that studies have demonstrated that women take more risk averse decisions and are for this reason the better disaster risk managers. In addition, to systematically strengthen countries' disaster resilience and invest limited resources in the most cost-effective manner, the collection of sex, age and disability-disaggregated data is critical so as to implement a

multi-hazard focused, gender-responsive prevention and preparedness plan in the face of climate change and the COVID-19 crisis.

In May 2020, the CARICOM Regional Statistics Programme revealed that in at least 4 Caribbean countries there were more confirmed COVID-19 cases for women than men (See Figure 1). However, reports have indicated that more men have died. With increasing availability and analysis of sex-disaggregated data, more targeted support can be provided.

**FIGURE 1**  
Confirmed cases by Sex – Selected Countries

Country			Not Stated
Jamaica	204	307	
Barbados	41	44	
Trinidad and Tobago	46	63	7
Bermuda	52	71	
Haiti	162	111	
Belize	9	9	

Source: CARICOM Regional Statistics Programme – 15 May 2020

To achieve optimal hurricane preparedness, the needs and potential of women, men, girls and boys need to be identified and leveraged. Women and men across all socio-economic parts of society should be meaningfully engaged to ensure a whole-of-society approach. Diversity of perspective and increasing women's leadership as decision-makers, is better practice and should reap benefits in governance in state as well as private sector development.

Moreover, it is imperative that Hurricane Mass Casualty Plans become more *gender* and *COVID-19* responsive. Sector-specific hurricane preparedness plans for 2020, especially in the agriculture and tourism sectors, should be revised and tested to promote gender-responsive resilience. Business recovery and continuity plans, along with the public-private partnerships that are being developed to respond to the COVID-19 impact must also incorporate hurricane preparedness and recovery strategies, which adequately identify and address women's and men's needs and potential alike. These plans need to integrate resources and strategies to address the unpaid care work responsibilities that parents currently face and is likely to increase as a result of the hurricane season. The UN Women MCO has developed an Action Brief which entails strategies that can be adapted.

Given the small island developing state context, 'COVID-19 Hurricane Shelter Management' for a pending severe weather threat could pose a significant challenge this year. Apart from the security protocols and guidelines according to specific requirements to prevent gender-based violence, Hurricane Shelter Managers must now institute COVID-19 measures as well. The Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) has developed COVID-19 specific guidelines, and UN Women MCO Caribbean has developed Shelter Guidelines in collaboration with PAHO and the United Nations Populations Fund for GBV Shelters in April 2020. Both guidelines will be instrumental in restructuring 'COVID-19 Hurricane Shelter Management.' The UN Women MCO will continue to collaborate to integrate lessons learned from previous hurricane-related experience to support efforts to ensure that families are better accommodated in shelters.

## Strengthening Resilience as a Region

In addition to the humanitarian benefits, building resilience to multi-faceted hazards would allow the Caribbean region to benefit from economies of scale, as well as create a platform for the sharing of lessons learned on what works for gender-responsive prevention, resilience and recovery. The UN Women MCO's Memorandum of Understanding with the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) for example, indicates the Agency's commitment to organize regional, gender responsive prevention, preparedness and response to disaster shocks.

It is important for humanitarian and relief efforts to be gender-responsive in order to improve access to emergency funding as well as service delivery. Service delivery should be based on the analysis of sex-disaggregated data to ensure that the needs of vulnerable and marginalized populations are adequately addressed. International, regional and national agendas must all be aligned to boost climate change adaptation and disaster resilience. Strengthening resilience will not only ensure enhanced prevention and preparedness but also enable a swift recovery from all hazards, including hurricanes and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2020 hurricane season is not just an unprecedented challenge, but it has the potential to become an unprecedentedly successful, gender-responsive disaster management experience in the history of the Caribbean. It is an opportunity to demonstrate lessons learned enhanced by the COVID-19 experience to build back better for women, men, boys and girls alike so as to keep the Caribbean on the path of resilient and sustainable development.

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