

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

*May 27, 2020*

Acting Administrator John Barsa  
United States Agency for International Development  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Acting Administrator Barsa,

We write to urge USAID to increase its investments in gender equality, and to ensure that USAID's COVID-19 response adequately prioritizes the needs of women and girls.

As we know, COVID-19 knows no boundaries. Without strong American leadership, the global health crisis will continue to devastate countries around the world, delay progress on life-saving programs, and ultimately, rebound back to our shores. COVID-19 is not an equal-opportunity virus. In fact, the pandemic has only exacerbated already existing vulnerabilities, wherein those who were already at risk before the pandemic are the ones who are most likely to suffer.

As such, we urge you to support the following:

- **Gender expert on the COVID-19 taskforce.** While we appreciate the degree to which gender has been mainstreamed across USAID, women and girls are facing particular challenges as a result of this pandemic. The inclusion of a gender expert on USAID's rapid response team would ensure that these challenges are being addressed appropriately.
- **Inclusive Data.** At a minimum, USAID should be using data that has been disaggregated by gender and age to guide its response. The impact of this virus on women and girls cannot be fully understood if the data being used is not disaggregated by these characteristics.

While there are many consequences of COVID-19, we urge you to act immediately to combat the impacts of the pandemic on women and girls with regard to the following areas of concern:

- **Education.** According to UNESCO, there are currently 743 million girls out of school. Schools are not just places of learning; they are also where young people are fed and receive psychosocial services. In addition, school attendance is directly correlated with lower rates of child marriage. In the absence of open schools, USAID should focus on ensuring that *all* students have access to low-tech or online distance learning and are trained in online safety precautions. When schools reopen, USAID should advocate for policies that encourage girls and young women to return to school, including gender-sensitive outreach, and flexibility for pregnant women and girls and young mothers.
- **Gender-based violence.** Crises like COVID-19 exacerbate risks for Gender-Based Violence (GBV), including intimate partner violence, female genital mutilation, and child

abuse. This threat is particularly acute right now, as movement is restricted, income has been disrupted, and access to healthcare systems is weakened. We urge you to surge support for programs like Safe from the Start, which is designed to address GBV in emergency humanitarian settings.

- **Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene.** Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) programs are more critical than ever. Vigorously washing our hands has become the new normal, but that requires access to a safe and reliable water supply – something that is not always available in developing countries. Women face specific barriers with regard to sanitation and hygiene. According to UNICEF, 70 percent of healthcare workers are women, and many are facing shortages of essential menstrual hygiene products. Healthcare facility managers often do not have training on the impacts of menstruation management on the use of protective equipment, leading women to bleed into protective suits, suppress menstruation through the use of oral contraceptives, or miss days of work. We urge you to strongly support a wide range of WASH programs to stop the spread of the virus and to address critical sanitation needs.
- **Access to healthcare.** Women not only make up the majority of healthcare workers, but they are also the predominant care providers for sick family members – which ultimately, increases their risk of contracting COVID-19. As such, it is critical to ensure women have access to confidential telehealth services throughout the duration of the pandemic.

Pandemics and humanitarian crises always affect women and girls differently than men and boys. USAID has spent the last decade strengthening its ability to respond nimbly to different needs based on gender and age; these areas of expertise are required now more than ever. We urge you to incorporate these recommendations into the COVID-19 taskforce, and stand ready to assist. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Grace Meng  
Member of Congress



Susan Brooks  
Member of Congress

/s/ Brian Fitzpatrick  
Member of Congress

/s/ Barbara Lee  
Member of Congress

/s/ Eliot L. Engel  
Member of Congress

/s/ Ted Deutch  
Member of Congress

/s/ Ilhan Omar  
Member of Congress

/s/ Jackie Speier  
Member of Congress

/s/ Steve Cohen  
Member of Congress

/s/ David N. Cicilline  
Member of Congress

/s/ Pramila Jayapal  
Member of Congress

/s/ Jamie Raskin  
Member of Congress

/s/ Raúl M. Grijalva  
Member of Congress

/s/ Juan Vargas  
Member of Congress

/s/ Chrissy Houlahan  
Member of Congress

/s/ Susan Wild  
Member of Congress

/s/ Adam B. Schiff  
Member of Congress

/s/ Lois Frankel  
Member of Congress

/s/ Jim Costa  
Member of Congress

/s/ Stephen F. Lynch  
Member of Congress

/s/ Dina Titus  
Member of Congress

/s/ Ed Case  
Member of Congress

/s/ Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
Member of Congress

/s/ Betty McCollum  
Member of Congress

/s/ Nydia M. Velázquez  
Member of Congress

/s/ Yvette D. Clarke  
Member of Congress

/s/ Karen Bass  
Member of Congress

/s/ Derek Kilmer  
Member of Congress

/s/Thomas R. Suozzi  
Member of Congress

/s/ Lucille Roybal-Allard  
Member of Congress

/s/ Jan Schakowsky  
Member of Congress

/s/ James P. McGovern  
Member of Congress

/s/ David Trone  
Member of Congress

/s/ Colin Allred  
Member of Congress

/s/ Albio Sires  
Member of Congress

/s/ Bill Foster  
Member of Congress

/s/ Xochitl Torres Small  
Member of Congress

/s/ Mark Pocan  
Member of Congress

/s/ Bonnie Watson Coleman  
Member of Congress

/s/ Eleanor Holmes Norton  
Member of Congress

/s/ Darren Soto  
Member of Congress

/s/ Jim Cooper  
Member of Congress

/s/ Adriano Espaillat  
Member of Congress

/s/ John Yarmuth  
Member of Congress

/s/ David E. Price  
Member of Congress

/s/ Lisa Blunt Rochester  
Member of Congress

/s/ Eddie Bernice Johnson  
Member of Congress

/s/ Henry C. “Hank” Johnson, Jr.  
Member of Congress