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 nimblly 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