

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS COSAINT

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

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*Dé Máirt, 23 Márta 2021*

*Tuesday, 23 March 2021*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9.30 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

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Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Cathal Berry,	Catherine Ardagh,
John Brady,	Joe O'Reilly.
Sorca Clarke,	
Brian Leddin,	
David Stanton.	

Teachta / Deputy Charles Flanagan sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

## Impact of Covid-19 on Gender Equality: Discussion

**Chairman:** I am grateful to members for agreeing to a meeting at this time, which is not our usual time, and under the constraints of virtuality. Following on from our meeting with Dóchas and others last October regarding the implementation of the UN's sustainable development goals, SDGs, it is timely and right that we have the opportunity today to discuss SDG 5, achieving gender equality. On behalf of the committee, I am very pleased to welcome: Ms Mary Van Lieshout, deputy CEO of GOAL; Ms Karol Balfe, head of tackling violence and building peace at Christian Aid Ireland; Ms Maeve Taylor, director of advocacy and communications of the Irish Family Planning Association, IFPA; Ms Louise Winstanley of ABColombia; and Ms Suzanne Keatinge, CEO, and Ms Louise Finan, head of policy, of Dóchas. I particularly welcome Ms Muna Abbas, country director with Plan International, who joins us from Jordan.

I begin with a brief word on our format in terms of privilege and process. Witnesses and guests are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as in any way adverse or damaging to the good name of any person or entity. Therefore, if statements are potentially defamatory in regard to an identifiable person or entity, speakers will be directed to discontinue their remarks. I am sure there will be no need to make any such direction and, if there is, that it will be complied with immediately. For any of our witnesses who are attending remotely from outside the Leinster House campus, which I understand is all of them, there are some limitations to parliamentary privilege. As such, they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as would a witness who is physically present. Guests participating in this committee session from a jurisdiction outside the State are further advised to be mindful of domestic law and how it might apply to any evidence given or tendered.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I also remind members that they are only allowed to participate in the meeting if they are physically located on the Leinster House complex.

I draw it to the attention of anyone watching this meeting online that some Oireachtas Members and witnesses are accessing this meeting in a remote format. Due to the unprecedented circumstances and the large number of people attending the meeting remotely, I ask that everybody exercise forbearance in the event of any technical issues that may arise and interfere with proceedings.

I call on Ms Van Lieshout to give her opening remarks and introduce us to the other witnesses, who may then give their opening remarks. After that, we will proceed to observations and questions from committee members. I ask members and guests to be mindful that we must bring our proceedings to a conclusion within a period of two hours from when the meeting started, in accordance with Covid regulations. Ms Van Lieshout has the floor and she is very welcome.

**Ms Mary Van Lieshout:** I thank the committee for this opportunity for members of Dóchas, the Irish network of international, development and humanitarian organisations, to brief members on the impact the Covid-19 crisis has had on progress towards gender equality globally. The last time a representative of Dóchas appeared before the committee, in October 2020,

there was a discussion on the implementation of the sustainable development goals, both in Ireland and overseas. SDG 5, achieving gender equality, means we commit to ending all forms of discrimination, violence and harmful practices against women and girls everywhere. It means recognising the value of unpaid care and domestic work. It means ensuring women's full and effective participation, and equal opportunities for leadership, at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. It means ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health, reproductive rights and economic rights and resources. Above all, SDG 5 means that governments must adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls at all levels.

I am particularly pleased to be appearing before the committee this month as it coincides with a number of global events on gender equality. The 65th sessions of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, the UN's largest annual gathering on gender equality and women's empowerment, is taking place currently. The Generation Equality Forum, organised by UN women and co-hosted by France and Mexico, will begin at the end of March having been delayed by a year because of Covid-19. It is timely also that we discuss this issue today as the Citizens' Assembly in Ireland resumes its work exploring recommendations to advance gender equality. Our efforts at home are inextricably linked with efforts at the EU, regionally and internationally to ensure women's rights.

It is more than 25 years since the landmark Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action were agreed at the Fourth World Conference on Women when 189 states, including Ireland, declared their determination to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of all humanity. Since then, we know that progress on gender equality has seen some positive steps forward but progress has been all too slow. Not a single country today can claim to have achieved gender equality, nor can any country claim to be one where women feel completely safe on our streets, as the recent tragic death of Sarah Everard while walking home in London demonstrates. This must change.

Today, however, we wish to focus on the specific impacts Covid-19 has had on women and girls across the world and we ask this committee to become a champion for them. The UN Secretary General, Mr. António Guterres, recently said that gender equality was the world's biggest human rights scourge and the Covid-19 crisis has a woman's face. He said, "Violence against women and girls in all forms has skyrocketed, from online abuse to domestic violence, trafficking, sexual exploitation and child marriage."

Goal is very conscious of the impact of Covid-19 on achieving gender equality and our teams are seeing first-hand how violence against women and girls in all forms has escalated. In response, we are integrating gender-based violence and child protection messaging into our Covid-19 awareness campaigns. In Zimbabwe, for example, Goal is including gender-based violence, GBV, protection messaging into its Covid-19 campaign, which to date has reached 2.8 million people. We know also that women's jobs are two times more vulnerable than men's and, indeed, we are currently seeing large volumes of women leaving the workforce as a result of the pandemic.

To speak to these issues in more detail, I am delighted to be accompanied today by colleagues from Plan International in Jordan, Christian Aid Ireland's partner, ABColombia, and the Irish Family Planning Association, IFPS, who will speak of the impact of the pandemic on girls' education, displacement, conflict and reproductive health. What each theme has in common is that there must be a renewed urgency to finding gender transformative policy responses that not only build back better, but in a more equal way. We need to ensure that Ireland, in every facet

of its foreign policy, positions gender equality at the centre of its approach towards a healthy and peaceful world. In effect, Ireland must develop on goal 5 of the sustainable development goals by 2030.

Today we have four specific asks of the committee. Our first ask is that the committee assists us in ensuring there is a more robust tracking of Ireland's progress in furthering the SDG agenda in its partner countries and internationally, including tracking data on marginalised groups which include women and girls and people living with disabilities.

We ask the committee also to support the EU's Gender Action Plan and call on the Irish Government to swiftly operationalise it, including the commitment to allocate 85% of overseas development aid, ODA, to programmes which have gender equality as their principle objective, and to support the implementation of a gender responsive recovery plan from Covid-19.

Third, we ask that the committee support Ireland's international commitment in its A Better World policy to addressing girls' education as a priority. We need a clear roadmap that outlines how Irish Aid intends to commit to and spend at least €250 million over five years on global education.

Finally, we ask the committee to work with the Irish Government to ensure it uses its voice on the UN Security Council to encourage all countries to fully implement the commitments in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, better known as CEDAW.

Ireland has been a champion for women, peace and security and we want to see that champion work on gender equality more broadly. I thank the committee for its support for these asks. I will now hand over to Ms Muna Abbas, head of mission and country director with Plan International in Jordan, who will speak to the committee about the situation in Jordan with respect to girls' education, Covid-19 and displacement.

**Ms Muna Abbas:** I thank Ms Van Lieshout. I thank the Chairman and respected committee members. It is my pleasure to be with the committee this morning.

While the Syrian crisis marks its tenth year this month, 40% of children under the age of 18 are registered as refugees. Jordan and Lebanon, as neighbouring countries, host the highest percentage of refugees globally when compared to the local population. Both Jordan and Lebanon are countries with limited resources where governments have already been struggling to respond to the needs of their own citizens, a situation that puts these countries at high risk of instability.

In Jordan, for example, 90,000 Syrian refugee children were reported to be out of school in 2019. This number is expected to be dramatically increased during the pandemic as the Government has closed schools and other learning spaces in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus.

In such a complex context, girls are the most affected as they can be subjected to gender-based violence, including early marriage. When we say, "early marriage", we mean marriage under the age of 18. Eventually, they are deprived of their right to education while also not having access to vital services for protection, nutrition, health and well-being. Before the conflict, 13% of Syrian women aged between 20 to 35 were married before the age of 18. Now, among Syrian refugees living in Jordan, rates have risen to as high as 29%.

In assessments conducted by Plan International in Jordan jointly with the United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA, to assess the impact of Covid-19 and the lockdown on girls, results show that adolescent girls have high household burdens and fewer positive outlets. Girls are busier doing household chores as well as taking care of younger children and helping them with their studies. All this means less time for adolescent girls to focus on their own education.

The gender digital divide whereby girls have reduced access to information and communication technology translates into reduced learning opportunities during school closures. For example, the average cost for Internet services per household in Jordan is approximately \$50 per month, which most families cannot afford, especially during the pandemic and lockdown and particularly among Syrian refugee families. Girls also reported that they have less access to tech devices such as mobile telephones, tablets and computers compared with boys in the same family.

With the support of Irish Aid and other donors, over the past four years we were able to support thousands of Syrians and vulnerable Jordanian children, mainly girls, to access educational opportunities. During the pandemic last year, hundreds of girls were supported to attend online classes by providing them with electronic devices and Internet connectivity.

The needs are huge and they are still here. An entire generation is at risk. We know we can help and how we can do so. We believe that together we can make a difference to those children's lives. I thank the committee. I will hand over to Ms Winstanley.

**Ms Louise Winstanley:** Agenda 2030 for the UN sustainable development goals recognises that development cannot be achieved without addressing violent conflict and building peace. In 2016, more countries were experiencing violent conflict than at any other time in the previous 30 years. Much of this violence is due to reoccurring and protracted conflicts. ABColombia is a partner of Christian Aid Ireland. For the next few minutes I will focus on Colombia.

Ireland has a long history of supporting peace in Colombia and this year it is particularly crucial. November will mark the fifth anniversary of the signing of the peace accord, which is currently in a very fragile state. In 2020, there was a quadrupling of the number of victims of massacres and combat increased by 65% compared with the last year before the signing of the peace accord. In January this year, over 11,000 people were forced to displace due to armed conflict as neo-paramilitary and other armed groups expanded their control over communities, territory and illicit economies. Targeted killings have also resulted in over 400 human rights defenders and 261 former FARC combatants being killed since 2016.

The coronavirus pandemic has played into this context, particularly affecting women and aggravating inequality and poverty. Women's participation in the labour market has fallen to the level of ten years ago as the pandemic hit the informal work in which women were engaged particularly hard. Confinement as a measure against coronavirus has meant those threatening women human rights defenders have been easily able to locate them. Many women defenders have been shot in or near their homes. Domestic violence has increased, as have femicides.

The conflict has left many women as heads of household, widening the inequality gap, and sexual and gender violence has been perpetrated as a weapon of war. One of the unique features of the Colombian peace accord is that it wove into all the agreements specific gender provisions. These gender provisions have the potential for structural change by reducing gender inequalities and furthering the rights of rural women, which is why when considering gender, peace and development in Colombia, the peace accord in an important roadmap not only for

peace building but also for good governance policies.

Comprehensive implementation of these programmes would contribute to gender empowerment and equality. However, for the peace accord to be implemented, it is essential to address the escalating violence by near-paramilitary and other criminal groups. These groups will only effectively be dismantled if the intellectual authors are identified and prosecuted and their sources of finance and political protection are cut off. Ireland, with its position on the UN Security Council, should call for that body to establish an independent group or panel of experts on organised crime to examine the position in Colombia. A technical report from an independent group of experts would strengthen the work of the UN mission of verification to Colombia and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, both of which have security guarantees within their mandates. Such a report would also assist Colombia in the design and implementation of a public policy to facilitate the identification and prosecution of the intellectual authors and a dismantling of these groups.

Colombia is a country which, compared with many other complex cases of conflict around the world, has a real possibility of achieving peace. It needs a country like Ireland to throw its weight and experience behind achieving the appointment of UN Security Council group of experts on organised crime that can offer the technical expertise that Colombia needs now.

**Ms Maeve Taylor:** Good morning and I thank the committee for the opportunity to address it. I will specifically address the question of sexual and reproductive health rights as an aspect of gender equality. The Irish Family Planning Association is the secretariat to the all-party Oireachtas interest group on sexual and reproductive health and the Irish collaborating partner of the UN Population Fund, UNFPA. It is also a member of the International Planned Parenthood Federation.

I will start with A Better World, Ireland's policy for international development, which is grounded, as members know, in human rights and the sustainable development goals. It recognises sexual and reproductive health rights as central to gender equality and universal health coverage. A Better World commits Ireland to advancing and protecting the programme of action of the International Conference on Population and Development, including action on sexual and reproductive health. According to A Better World, access to health services, including comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, is fundamental to realising sexual and reproductive health rights and for transforming women's health outcomes. The pandemic has had a devastating impact on women's and girls' access to basic health services, including family planning. I will concentrate on three aspects, which are sexual and reproductive health and rights, female genital mutilation and child marriage and access to contraception.

In 2020, in a policy brief on the impact of the pandemic on women, the UN Secretary General outlined the unique health needs of women and girls and also the social norms and gender stereotypes that act as barriers to services. My colleagues have mentioned some of these. According to the report, the diversion of attention and critical resources away from essential sexual and reproductive health services can result in exacerbated maternal mortality and morbidity, increased rates of adolescent pregnancies, HIV and sexually transmitted diseases.

Last November, the Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs, Deputy Brophy, launched the 2020 State of World Population report, which is published each year by UNFPA, the UN sexual and reproductive health agency. The report estimated the impact of the pandemic on girls and according to the report, programmes designed to promote gender equality by ending practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation are facing serious delays

in implementation.

My colleague, Ms Abbas, has already raised the question of child marriage. According to the UNFPA, at a conservative estimate, a one-year average delay in interventions to end child marriage could lead to over 7 million more child marriages over the next decade that could otherwise have been averted. In addition, the State of World Population report projected that financial insecurities caused by the pandemic could result in 5.6 million additional child marriages taking place between 2020 and 2030. The total effect of Covid-19 could therefore potentially result in 13 million additional child marriages that would not otherwise have happened.

On the question of female genital mutilation, the UNFPA predicts an estimated two-year delay in prevention programmes would lead to 2 million cases of female genital mutilation over the next decade that would otherwise have been averted. In that respect progress towards the elimination of female genital mutilation, which is target 5.5 of the sustainable development goals, could be reduced by a third.

The UNFPA also conducted analysis in 115 low and middle income countries in January this year. The research suggests that while many countries were able to maintain or restore access to essential services, an estimated 12 million women may have been unable to access family planning services during the pandemic, with disruption of supplies and services lasting an average of 3.6 months. As a result of these disruptions, as many as 1.4 million unintended pregnancies may have occurred before women were able to resume use of these services.

The forthcoming session of the Commission on Population and Development, which will be in April 2021, will focus on the impact of Covid-19 on sexual and reproductive health in the context of population, food security, nutrition and sustainable development. These are the four key principles of Irish Aid's programme. In advance of the commission, the UN Secretary General has called for coverage of sexual and reproductive healthcare to be prioritised as integral to sustainable development. He has highlighted the need for family planning, emergency contraception, the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, post-abortion care and, where legal, safe abortion services to the full extent of the law.

Female genital mutilation, child marriage and unintended pregnancy have a devastating impact on girls, affecting physical and mental health, their ability to stay in education, the capacity to reach full potential as women, citizens, workers and leaders. Investment in sexual and reproductive health will have transformative effects on gender equality and women's empowerment. This includes programmes that support the right of women and couples to choose the number and spacing of any children they opt to have. We can reduce unintended pregnancy and unsafe abortion through the provision of comprehensive sexuality education, contraception and safe and legal abortion care. However, UNFPA, in its 2020 pandemic response plan, identified a funding gap of approximately US\$276 million that would be required to meet the sexual and reproductive health needs of those in humanitarian, fragile and development contexts. Ireland is a consistent supporter of the UNFPA, which oversees implementation of the International Conference on Population and Development, ICPD, agenda. Ireland contributes core funding of approximately €3.5 million a year. Ireland supports reproductive health initiatives through its bilateral programme and is highly regarded by its partners for a strategic approach that sees gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights as indispensable to sustainable development. This support must be maintained, expanded and increased if efforts to build forward better are to meaningfully address gender equality.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Taylor. Does that complete the list?

**Ms Mary Van Lieshout:** Yes, it does. We are now happy to take any questions from members.

**Chairman:** I, therefore, propose to turn to members. We will leave it to Ms Van Lieshout to allocate the best person to respond to the various observations and questions put by members. Is that okay?

**Ms Mary Van Lieshout:** Yes, I am happy to do that.

**Chairman:** I will open discussion to members of the committee. I thank those who have made their opening statements and contributions so far.

**Deputy John Brady:** I wish everybody a good morning and thank the witnesses for their powerful presentations. They are very much appreciated. They contained some useful information but also some stark and worrying statistics and information. I appreciate the opportunity to engage with the witnesses and to ask questions. I agree totally with the comment that gender inequality is one of the world's greatest human rights scourges. That is a very important point to make at this stage and a very important starting point for us all. It is important to address the human rights scourge that is gender inequality. We see human rights as the bedrock of everything we do and everything we should do, but we also see how human rights defenders across the world, particularly women human rights defenders, are targeted and imprisoned. I have addressed this issue on many occasions. In countries such as Saudi Arabia, female human rights defenders are imprisoned for doing such basic things as applying for a job within the UN. These are big issues that we need to get on top of if we are serious about addressing human rights abuses.

Covid has shown up many difficulties and highlighted many areas in which gender inequality is rife. It has also highlighted other challenges with regard to domestic violence. This has, of course, been with us for far too long but it has become more prevalent over the past year or so. I have engaged with a number of organisations that deal with domestic violence in Ireland. Only last week, I met a group in my constituency of Wicklow: Bray Women's Refuge. Those I met with unfortunately painted a very stark picture with regard to how bad the problem has become over the past year. We have such supports in our country, although unfortunately not at the level needed, but I can only imagine how women must feel in less well off, developing countries where there are not such supports.

Ireland has done a great deal to address the issues of inequality and gender inequality but we are not doing enough with regard to the SDGs, particularly the fifth goal, which concerns gender inequality. I believe we are ranked tenth in the statistics for 2020, which shows that we have a long way to go if Ireland is to be in a position to say we are doing everything we can. In its report, Social Justice Ireland states that Ireland needs to do much more to accelerate progress in this regard within our country.

With regard to the four asks the witnesses have made, the first is to ensure more robust tracking of Ireland's progress in furthering the sustainable development agenda. Will they elaborate in that regard?

Another area in which I am very interested is Colombia. I welcome the report on Colombia. Other committee members and I have raised the matter of the serious issues within that country. It is interesting to see how the situation is impacting on women in Colombia in particular. I have made reference to certain statistics previously with regard to human rights defenders, in-



cluding former members of Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC, and other community activists, who have been targeted since 2016. This is a very useful report of which we, as committee members, should take heed and feed into our deliberations as we engage with some of the organisations that are also on the ground in Colombia and the Colombian ambassador to Ireland in the coming while. We have also asked for an engagement with Eamon Gilmore, who has played a very important role in the peace process in Colombia. The report is very welcome, albeit very stark. It shows that more than 400 human rights defenders have been murdered since the peace process commenced.

The issues in Jordan are again very stark. This committee did some important work last week in marking the grim fact of the tenth year of conflict within Syria and the human impact this has had with regard to displaced people in Jordan and other neighbouring countries such as Turkey and Lebanon. It is really important to see the impact this conflict is having with regard to education and gender inequality. I appreciate that.

I have one final point to make. It has regard to Covid, which has had a very serious impact globally. Some of the statistics as to how it has unfortunately impacted more on women are very grim and very stark. Again, this committee did some important work on the distribution of the Covid-19 vaccine to developing countries. We had some excellent contributors to our deliberations, including Dr. David Nabarro, Dr. Kieran Harkin and a number of other important people, who painted a grim picture as to the inequality in the roll-out of vaccines. Some stark information as to price was given. Some pharmaceutical companies are making massive profits from the vaccines. There is inequality involved. For example, a dose of one of the vaccines costs €2.50 in Europe but €5.80 is charged in Uganda for the same dose. One of the major calls made by all of those people with which we engaged, which was reflected in one of the key findings of the report the committee published, was that while COVAX is important in the roll-out of the vaccine to developing countries, the Covid-19 technology access pool, C-TAP, is also important. The latter is a platform that has been created to facilitate the sharing of intellectual property rights, data, know-how and cell lines related to Covid-19 vaccines. It is a voluntary scheme which would allow countries and pharmaceutical companies to develop the vaccine and roll it out. I firmly believe there should be no profit made on the pandemic. That was one of the key findings of the committee. Have people on the ground in our guests' organisations looked at C-TAP in the context of the roll-out of Covid vaccines and the obvious disproportionate impact Covid is having on women across the world? Another key finding of the committee was to call on the Government to sign up to C-TAP and encourage pharmaceutical companies to voluntarily sign up to it to share those intellectual rights such that all people, particularly those in less developed countries, can access the vaccine.

I again thank our guests for their contributions and for engaging with the committee. I full support each of the four asks.

**Chairman:** I propose to take contributions and questions from Deputies and then return to Ms Van Lieshout and the rest of the panel.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** I thank our wonderful guests. It is never easy to hear gender equality being spoken about at such length and its impact in the context of such a wide array of issues, but it exists and we cannot continue to hide from that existence because we will never have true human rights while gender inequality remains. I have heard Covid-19 being referred to as a universal leveller. However, it has not been a universal leveller. Research has shown that women across the globe have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic compared with men. One of the fundamental reasons for that is the gender inequalities that existed before

Covid ever became a thing. These gender inequalities are wide ranging. There is the gender pay gap, the responsibility for family and childcare, the fact that front-line staff in some areas are predominantly female, but also the inadequate supports that were in place.

A recent piece of work by the European Institute for Gender Equality was quite startling. It found that 4.5% of women's employment is at risk across the globe because of the pandemic, compared with 3.8% of men's employment. Women make up 40% of the global labour force yet account for 54% of job losses to date. Workers in industries such as retail, hospitality and residential care are predominantly women and those are the areas that have suffered the heaviest job losses to date. Women make up the bulk of the workforce in those sectors and 40% of all jobs lost by women during the crisis were in these professions.

A report published last summer by McKinsey & Company described how women globally have been 1.8 times as likely as men to lose their jobs because of the pandemic. It reported that societal attitudes have also shaped how women experience the economic fallout, based on their perceived place in society. Despite the resurgence in employment during the summer months last year, men regained employment at twice the rate that women did, indicating that the economic impact of the pandemic will be felt much longer and harder by women compared with men.

When Ireland first went into lockdown last March, the caring responsibility was compounded in many ways by the efforts of some to be more accommodating of women. For example, as a result of the gender pay gap, women's work often took less of a priority compared with men's work. Employers were more understanding that women also had caring roles but, as a result of that and the priority that was given to male partners, women actually ended up working considerably longer hours every day just to meet those ever-increasing demands being made of them. The National Women's Council of Ireland published a really good report on the impact on women's mental health and well-being of carrying the lion's share of the load in terms of work and caring in the home.

On the gender-based violence aspect, in three months last year there was a 40% increase in the number of applications for protection and barring orders compared with the same period the previous year. The figures are stark. There were 1,300 requests for refuge in domestic violence services that could not be met. That is eight people per day whose requests for refuge went unanswered.

When we look at the future and coming out of Covid - we will come out of Covid at some point - there is no doubt that although women have been the hardest hit by the pandemic, they will also be the backbone of the recovery in their communities, circles and environments. For that to happen, women's inclusion, representation, rights, social and economic outcomes, equality and protection must be at the core of national and global responses. Financial stimulus packages and social assistance programmes must be based on greater equality, opportunities and social protection for women. We must not allow Covid to be used as an excuse to reverse the little progress on gender equality that has been made. Rather, it should become the catalyst to create something new that focuses on these pre-existing conditions and says "No more". While the eyes of governments nationally and internationally are on these inequalities, there will never be a better time to address them or to implement policies that go to the core of what created the inequalities in the first place. Covid simply shone a light on the extent of the inequalities that exist, inequalities that were there in my mother's time, my grandmother's time and my great-grandmother's time. That is what I think needs to happen now. When we look to the future and policies, we need to look to training, education and employment opportunities

for women, the protection of activists and political representation.

On the issue of women's health, more than 30,000 women in Ireland alone are currently awaiting a gynaecological appointment. When that is coupled with the waiting lists for Breast-Check and cervical cancer screening, we are looking at a potential perfect storm in terms of women's health in Ireland. That is before looking elsewhere in Europe or across the globe where the disproportionate effect of conflict and other gender-based violence will have an even more profound effect.

What is needed now more than ever is that not only are women at the table in terms of future development, but that their voices are actually heard at that table. I agree with our guests that tracking progress is absolutely vital because if it is not in place, plans become words on pages. Without targets, focus and key performance indicators, gender equality will remain out of reach for future generations because there will not be any meaningful planned progress written down to be achieved. I am sorry if all that comes across as a bit of a rant. I fundamentally agree with the vast majority of what the representatives have stated. In terms of tracking progress on gender equality, what would they like to see achieved in the next 18 months, three years and five years? What is the best course of action for us to prioritise in the short term and the medium term?

**Chairman:** I am going to go back to Ms Van Lieshout now before I come back to members. A considerable number of issues have been raised by Deputies Brady and Clarke. Deputy Clarke mentioned the vital issue of gender-based violence. As Chair of this committee, I express regret and concern at developments in Turkey where the Turkish Government has unilaterally withdrawn from the Istanbul Convention. That is a most retrograde step and I hope it will be the subject of a rethink at the earliest opportunity.

**Ms Mary Van Lieshout:** I thank Deputies Brady and Clarke for their important and supportive inputs. I will introduce some other colleagues who are joining us today. Ms Suzanne Keatinge is the director of Dóchas, and she will speak to the questions from both Deputies on the important tracking of the sustainable development goals, SDGs, and how Dóchas is leading and contributing to that process. I am also going to look to my colleague, Ms Louise Finan from Dóchas, to take Deputy Brady's question on vaccine equity, because Dóchas has been spearheading initiatives in that regard on behalf of the sector. I am going to invite my colleague, Ms Karol Balfe from Christian Aid, to speak to Deputy Brady's concerns and some of the points he has raised on the protection of human rights defenders, a matter on which we all share a deep concern. Karol Balfe will speak to some of Christian Aid's experience in that regard. I first invite in Suzanne Keatinge.

**Ms Suzanne Keatinge:** I thank Ms Van Lieshout and the committee for this great session. The Deputies asked about SDGs. I am grateful to the committee for looking for practical actions in terms of what it can do. It is important to say that Ireland should have been looking at a review of the national implementation plan last year and it did not happen. We really need to see new energy on that to make sure we are tracking what we are doing and not doing. That applies not only in Ireland but to our programme countries. Perhaps it is an appropriate proposal to this committee that we pay particular attention to SDG 5, based on this conversation. I loved what Deputy Clarke said about letting women be a catalyst for something new. Perhaps that should be our way of championing this issue.

We have a great international development policy and, at the heart of it, Irish Aid stated it wants to think about what leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first actually

means. That has to be about women and girls. We have not yet heard what that guidance looks like and what specifically they are going to do to make sure the policy really does make sure no one is left behind. I urge the committee to ask questions around this policy to make sure it is very clear and that they are prioritising the right things.

**Ms Mary Van Lieshout:** Before we go to Ms Finan, I will ask for some additional words on this question from my colleague, Ms Maeve Taylor, from the United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA.

**Ms Maeve Taylor:** I should clarify that I am representing the Irish Family Planning Association, IFPA, although we are the Irish collaborating partner of UNFPA, particularly for its State of World Population report launch, which will be happening soon. I want to follow up on what Ms Keatinge has said about tracking, monitoring and the A Better World policy. It is an excellent policy and, from an IFPA perspective, one of the things we were happy to see was a very strong grounding of human rights and gender equality in that policy, with respect for sexual and reproductive health and rights in a way we had not seen previously in Irish Aid or Ireland's policy.

I spoke yesterday to a colleague in Ethiopia who was wholehearted in her respect for the way Irish Aid has integrated policy approaches, good critical analysis and brought sexual and reproductive health and rights into its work on sustainable development as a core aspect. However, we need to see more. As Ms Keatinge said, we have not seen the guidance yet and one of the promises of A Better World was a new sexual and reproductive health and rights initiative. This is something that will give guidance and allow us a framework for accountability and monitoring and for critical engagement with Irish Aid to know how Ireland is pushing forward its strong and respected objectives around gender equality in the context of sexual and reproductive health and rights. In the context of tracking, the publication and production of that initiative would be an extremely important way forward.

**Ms Mary Van Lieshout:** I will invite my colleague, Louise Finan, to speak to Deputy Brady's question around vaccine equity. We will then go to Karol Balfe on the human rights issues that have been raised.

**Ms Louise Finan:** Good morning to the committee members; it is great to see them all again. I thank the committee for endorsing the cause of the people's alliance for vaccine equity. We were delighted to see the committee's recent report and support its calls.

The key point to note is that, globally, over 70% of the healthcare workforce are women. A fact that is quite shocking is those women often face violence in performing their roles and there is a risk that is amplified over access to the finite resources of a Covid-19 vaccine. The safety and security of those delivering Covid-19 vaccines must also be of utmost priority. Other health crises have shown that delivery and facilitation of vaccines will depend disproportionately on the unpaid labour of women and girls and this will impact especially on the poorest and those in rural areas. We know providing equitable access to safe and effective Covid-19 vaccines in low and middle-income countries will be a catastrophic moral failure if we do not do it. It will impede progress towards ending this pandemic. It will compound and deepen the setback to girls' and women's rights, leaving them further behind. We are part of a network of organisations calling for equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines. We strongly endorse the calls this committee has made and will happily provide any further information.

**Ms Karol Balfe:** I thank Deputy Brady for raising the issue of human rights defenders. It

is an important issue in many countries across the globe. Front Line Defenders highlighted in 2020 that 333 human rights defenders were killed doing their work. That is a very shocking figure. These are the people who are often at the coalface of injustice. They are often the ones who are working with communities, deeply embedded with them, fighting for issues such as gender equality, peace and human rights. They are experiencing the most brutal forms of retaliation by being killed for the work they do. I thank the Deputy for highlighting that important issue.

These matters arise in the broader context of global restrictions on civil society spaces. Attacks on human rights defenders are not happening in isolation but are a part of a broader trend whereby states are bringing in increasingly restrictive and oppressive legislation and policy to restrict civil society's work more broadly. Civicus has classified that in the past couple of years, 111 countries have brought in such restrictive legislation. According to its categorisation, only 3.4% of the globe live in fully open civil society spaces. That is a shocking fact to take back and consider in the context of how we see these issues.

Covid-19 has, of course, only made the situation worse because emergency powers have been introduced in a number of countries. States have, unfortunately, used those emergency powers to restrict further the work of human rights defenders and civil society. It is also important to highlight that there are gendered aspects to attacks on human rights defenders. All human rights defenders experience particular attacks, but women experience different types of attacks because of the work that they do with communities and challenging social norms around gender inequality. As well as the physical threats and killings that they face alongside male human rights defenders, they also face slurs about their name, stigmatisation, discrimination, sexual assault and sexual violence because of the work they do. It is very important to note that these attacks, much like other levels of gender-based violence, can increase during conflict situations, so it is an important area.

In regard to what Ireland can do, I have been a champion of this around the civil society space and that has been very welcome through the various UN resolutions and initiatives that it has pushed there. There is an opportunity with the ongoing membership of the UN Security Council because, in the Security Council, we are not seeing civil society systematically included and shaping the policies that have a huge and detrimental impact on their lives. There is a very important way that Ireland can bring civil society and human rights defenders into the Security Council space. Major decisions are being made about military responses in countries without consulting those human rights defenders and civil society actors. One important thing they need to consider when doing that is that they factor in reprisals against human rights defenders who engage with the Security Council, and that they engage fully with UN guidelines on this to make sure human rights defenders do not experience further threats and attacks because of that advocacy.

**Ms Mary Van Lieshout:** I will hand back to the Chairman for further questions from members.

**Chairman:** I thank the witnesses for their responses so far. I call Senator Joe O'Reilly.

**Senator Joe O'Reilly:** I thank our guests. It has been a very enlightening and provocative session. I would like to hone in on a few areas. The global point is that Covid has seriously exacerbated an already existing gender inequality. I will deal first with women's participation in the workplace. It is very clear that women are the greatest victims of displacement as the kind of jobs they are in, outside the front-line healthcare area, tend to be less well-paid and there is an

in-built discrimination in areas like hospitality, which are the areas that have lost out. Women have been displaced in employment right across the world, no less here than elsewhere. It is a huge issue. I would be interested to hear the witnesses' comments on what can be done. There are two areas, the developing world and areas of conflict, and the more developed world, and the challenge is obviously greater in the former. What would their comments be about retraining, education and long-term education? There will be an issue. One need not be an expert in economics to assume that quite a few of these jobs will not return in the medium term, so we will have a deficit and a spin-off. Therefore, there is a need for retraining, for re-education and for new opportunities. Perhaps the witnesses can comment around this, in particular how we might label our overseas development aid and demand that kind of thing in the developing world. Can we also be in any way prescriptive in our own area? Overall, women's participation in the workplace is a key issue.

Second, as all in this forum know, education is very important. The witnesses gave us a very stark figure that 90,000 young female Syrian refugees did not participate in school or education last year. That is a shocking statistic but I know it is only indicative and that it is repeated elsewhere. I am inclined to be solutions-focused and we want to be solutions-focused in the way we do our committee work in that we want to make recommendations and ultimately effect change. There is no difficulty or disagreement between us around the aims, objectives or ambitions and we are *ad idem* on that. It is a question of how to resolve it. Do the witnesses have suggestions as to how we could re-focus our overseas aid, make new demands or apply new criteria? Is there much we can actively do to correct a wrong such as that cited in Jordan, and I know such wrongs are repeated all over the place? Education is a huge issue.

I want to turn to the issue of domestic violence. We are all getting anecdotal evidence around domestic violence. It is a horrendous crime and a wrong that is with us perpetually, but it is clearly exacerbated by the Covid situation, with people being at home together and all that goes with that. It is a real issue. Without seeking to be parochial, in my own county, in Cavan town, we need a women's refuge. The ideal would be that we did not need these things in the first instance but, sadly, we do. We do not have one there and the nearest women's refuge is in Dundalk, so even in the developed western world, there is a clear need to tackle this question head-on. When I attend policing committees, as all Oireachtas Members do at a local level, I am constantly getting statistics regarding an increase in domestic violence. If it is bad here, it is clearly worse in many of the areas the witnesses are dealing with. I am not sure if the witnesses can be prescriptive in this area as to what we might do. We must unequivocally condemn this and we must be of one voice on that, needless to say. However, how can we practically impact on the situation? We can feel powerless in the face of such a global phenomena.

On another issue, the Chairman will be aware I have been raising this in other forums outside this committee, and it was raised earlier by Deputy Brady, so it has been addressed and I do not wish to labour it. It is the issue of vaccine equality, which is a huge issue that links to the whole issue of gender inequality and to every other question, in particular the addressing of the Covid variants. I support the concerns around that and I agree our Government should be out there on that. As a committee, we have been very clear and prescriptive about that. As a committee, we need to be very focused on getting some sort of outcomes from our work because there is not much point in having weekly meetings where we are platitudinous if we do not effect some outcomes, although it is a very amorphous kind of area.

It is a great discussion. It is one of the tragic outcomes of Covid that it has exacerbated and set back progress on gender in equality. We are witnessing the reversing of progress in health

equality, gender equality and educational opportunity. It is very sad that the entire equality agenda is a victim of Covid, on top of everything else. Those are my thoughts. I appreciate the opportunity to contribute. Well done to our guests.

**Chairman:** Thank you. I was struck earlier by a comment of Ms Maeve Taylor when she spoke about the unacceptable practice of FGM, the direct adverse impact on the international targets for the elimination of FGM by 2030 and the fact Covid-19 is in a position to adversely affect these targets. I know we have interim reviews of the performance of the sustainable development goals, SDGs, over the entire range of issues. However, I wonder about the possibility or likelihood of putting something like FGM under the microscope and having a more urgent assessment of aspects of the SDGs, rather than await a full interim review. Is there a possibility of an emergency look that would certainly ensure that these pretty stark changes to our targets could at least be mitigated if not entirely addressed?

**Ms Mary Van Lieshout:** The very short answer to Senator O'Reilly's question is that women need to be at the table in developing the response and recovery plans relating to Covid so that all of the various ways in which it has disproportionately impacted on them are appreciated in the recovery plan. However, I would not leave it to a short answer. I will invite my colleagues to respond to some of the key points raised. Muna Abbas will speak to the questions on retraining and education, Suzanne Keatinge will also respond and we will invite Maeve Taylor to talk about gender-based violence and to speak to the Chairman's question about FGM.

**Ms Muna Abbas:** I will start with the fact that the Middle East is a data desert. It is really hard to find accurate data and analyse that data. We always face this problem when we try to analyse a certain problem or collect evidence. The existing data shows that women are not participating in the workforce. Jordan has one of the lowest rates globally in this area. The unemployment rate for women in Jordan is very high and the employment rate for women is one of the lowest in the region and globally. It is a complicated problem and we need to come up with comprehensive multidimensional solutions. Education is part of it. We need to redirect education to respond to market needs. We also need to work on raising awareness among families and communities about the need to give more space to women to participate, to get out and to be engaged economically because many women report that they are not allowed to do so by family members, husbands or elderly people in the family.

It is also about enforcing laws and legislation that relate to workplace safety and safeguarding in the workplace. For example, we do not have systems for reporting harassment in the workplace. We cannot capture the data. Women do not report it. There is no system for reporting. It is a complicated problem and we need to come up with comprehensive solutions. Education is key. We all know that it is life-changing and life-saving but we need to direct our education programmes to be responsive to market needs. Covid gave us a lot of learning opportunities such as using technology and being connected on a national level to training courses and programmes women do not need to attend physically because transport is expensive and sometimes it is not safe to travel from one place to another. Technology is giving us a lot of opportunity but so far, it has been underutilised. It can be life-changing for women.

**Ms Suzanne Keatinge:** Regarding the Chairman's question about whether we should be thinking about a specific report to bring some urgency to this issue, it is worth saying in respect of the SDGs that in the past, there has been this idea of a spotlight report. We know that next year, Ireland must offer its voluntary national review at the high-level political forum. Is this another opportunity to say "Let's focus on this issue of gender"?

In response to the question from Deputy Clarke, it is really about what we should prioritise. As we have seen here, there is no magic bullet nor is there any quick fix. We know it is complicated and that a range of responses are needed. If I dare attempt to think about how to prioritise over the next 18 months, a few things that have already been touched on come to mind. First, we are in this Covid environment and the vaccine issue must be brought to the fore. The phrase “We’re in the same storm but different boats” is really important. We know that unless we are all safe, nobody is safe. As has already been said, the issue of vaccines is so important and we have to get it right now.

It is important to emphasise that in terms of Irish Aid and what Ireland is doing on the UN Security Council, it is championing the right things. It does have these very good policies in place. We also know that Frances Fitzgerald, MEP, is doing a great job at EU level around the gender action programme and really promoting those issues at EU level. The problem is not lack of policies; it is lack of implementation. This is what we really need to focus on. It involves tracking and questioning of where the progress is and what the measurements are over time periods. Let us not forget that with these policies, we also need to recommit to funding. This involves funding of overseas development aid and funding around specific gender programmes if we are to implement these policies.

My third priority is collaboration on so many different levels. In 2018 - perhaps some members of this committee were there - Ireland led an international caucus of female parliamentarians. That was an amazing experience where we saw that learning from Ireland, America and Europe, but also from Africa. It was so rich and important and will surely help us speed up some of these processes. We have seen today that collaboration between NGOs, members of this committee and politicians.

The final issue I would prioritise is the need for us to keep collaborating in order to keep the conversation very live in the public space among the Irish population and globally through interactions like this one. It involves really engaging at constituency level and getting engaged with the national conversation around gender equality. These are four things I would prioritise. I am sure there are more. I will hand over to other colleagues.

**Ms Mary Van Lieshout:** Ms Taylor and Ms Winstanley will join us to speak about the questions on gender-based violence and GM.

**Ms Maeve Taylor:** In response to the question from Senator Joe O’Reilly and the comments from the Chairman about FGM, the Irish Family Planning Association runs an FGM treatment clinic funded by the HSE for women in Ireland who have experienced FGM. When we look at the issues of girls in education, women in the workforce and issues like FGM and child marriage, I am prompted to think about some of the titles of United Nations Population Fund reports in recent years that have focused on girls at ten years of age and adolescent pregnancy. In focusing on how we get women to the table, we must look back at the lives of girls and how we ensure girls can stay in education, are safe from gender-based violence and are not grappling with unintended pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections such as HIV when they are adolescents but are able to plan their lives and futures. One of the core issues is access to reproductive health services and information and sexuality education. In 2019, we held a civil society dialogue in advance of the 25th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development.. At a time when we used to be able to pack rooms with people and have them thronging around tables - it seems like a very long time ago now - at every single table there were individuals working on development issues and thematic issues relating to the LGBT community. Those people included youth and health workers, and policy influencers. At one



point, everyone in the room was talking about sexuality education. They were discussing issues such as their experience of poor sexuality education in Ireland as young people, their frustration about their children not having access to quality education in schools now or their understanding of the ways in which denial of sexuality education globally impacts on a girls' capacity to flourish. Focusing in on those issues relating to girls and adolescents and how we build forward better and get women to the table is critical.

**Ms Louise Winstanley:** In addressing the issue relating to Colombia, I will provide some statistics in order that the committee can understand how prevalent conflict-related sexual violence was. The constitutional court in Colombia said that it was a systematic practice. Oxfam undertook two studies which show that between 2000 and 2009 there were 149 cases per day of sexual violence in armed conflict. When it then did a follow-up study in 2010 to 2015, it found that there were 400 cases of sexual violence against women in conflicts each day. What is worth noting here is that the second study showed that the increase occurred during peace talks. We know definitely that sexual violence in conflict and domestic violence is a continuum between this kind of violence. They are inextricably linked because of the kind of male attitudes which perpetrate this violence.

One of the things that the women particularly addressed during the peace talks and which they put firmly on the agenda was that there was a need in the transitional justice system to ensure that there were no amnesties for conflict-related sexual violence. This is the first peace accord in the world which stated that there should be no amnesties. One of the difficulties now is to completely ensure that there are no amnesties for conflict-related sexual violence.

One of the things that women are asking for in particular - this is really key at this moment because if the committee is going to visit Colombia, it is one of the asks that I would have - is that there be a discussion of the fact that there needs to be a national case in the transitional justice system on conflict-related sexual violence. This would be essential if we are to really see that there are no amnesties and that the issue of sexual violence is taken very seriously. If this does not happen, it is going to be very difficult to change male attitudes on violence towards women. This is a key ask that I would like to put on the committee's agenda when it visits Colombia. I thank the committee.

**Ms Mary Van Lieshout:** I thank the Chairman and I will hand back to him to handle the next element of our conversation.

**Chairman:** I will return to the members of the committee who may be offering to speak. I have received apologies from Deputy Stanton who had to leave a moment ago. Do any members wish to make further contributions at this stage?

Before returning to Ms Van Lieshout for closing comments, I want to acknowledge the work of Dóchas and the importance of Irish Aid and its team in ensuring that its priorities are kept very much to the fore. I also acknowledge the work that Ireland continues to do with the UN, notwithstanding our membership of the Security Council, but also in its hosting of recent meetings on the matter of girls' education and acknowledging the fact that during the pandemic alone, almost 20 million girls have been denied schooling and have left education. There continue to be an enormous number, some 130 million girls, out of school worldwide, and I stress the importance of education. I thank Ms Abbas for her focus, particularly on Jordan and Lebanon, having regard to the refugee situation there and the need to ensure that education standards are kept up. She spoke about online education and courses and ensuring that they are of a certain standard that will allow for a situation where school accreditations are given and

that education can be resumed at some stage in the future.

Unless our witnesses would like to come back in to comment further on any of those points, I will ask Ms Van Lieshout to proceed to her closing comments. If any of her guests would like to prioritise issues for our committee after this meeting, we will obviously be in contact with our Government and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, and the Departments of Foreign Affairs and the Taoiseach. We have been working, as Deputy Brady said, on the whole area of Covid-19 vaccine equity but our witnesses have raised a number of important issues this morning that we would be keen to continue to highlight across the wider civil society here in Ireland and to also ensure that the Government keeps these issues high on its agenda.

**Ms Mary Van Lieshout:** I thank the Chairman and all of the committee members for this very rich and important discussion. I also thank the Chairman for the generous offer to follow up on further requests on our behalf.

To summarise the conversation and to perhaps highlight and point the direction for some of those asks, I will invite Suzanne Keatinge, the director of Dóchas, to conclude on behalf of the agencies represented here and of the Dóchas membership.

**Ms Suzanne Keatinge:** I thank Ms Van Lieshout. In some very brief closing remarks, I want to thank the committee for giving us this chance to share with it some of these stories. We are all very much on the same page in that we cannot afford to allow Covid-19 to get in the way of the urgent issue of gender equality. As has been stated, Covid-19 has exacerbated and accelerated the trends. There is a real urgency around this issue.

I also thank the Dóchas members for sharing some of their stories and these very stark facts. As Ms Taylor said, there have been 13 million more child marriages as a result of Covid-19 over a 12-month period, which is just extraordinary. Ms Abbas said that there is an entire generation at risk in Jordan and in the Middle East in general because of a lack of education. We know that many of those girls will not go back to education at all. That potential of those women and girls is lost for an entire generation.

We also heard from Christian Aid about the impact of conflict. I am aware that the committee had a session on Syria where the issue of gender-based violence and the use of women as weapons of war was very starkly put forward during those sessions.

We also heard that we cannot afford the luxury of being overwhelmed by this. As Deputy Clarke said so well, we know that women are going to be the backbone of the recovery. For that to happen, they need to be at the table and to be those leaders we have seen in our own communities. We need to find the way and the space to bring them to the table and to hear their voices.

I will make one positive comment about the pandemic in that it has allowed the committee to be here this morning to hear different voices from the field and from the wide range of Dóchas's NGOs, which I really appreciate. Let us hope that we can keep doing that more. The solution is going to come from these conversations by bringing different people together. We can see that with that stronger collaboration, I genuinely believe that we can go faster and make that difference.

The outcome that I needed from the session today was to hear from the committee members that they will be our champions on gender equality, on the SDGs and on the importance of ODA and Irish Aid's work. I hope the committee members will go away with some practical takeaways. We are very open to exploring more and I reiterate the idea concerning the SDGs

and the Spotlight report, and there being some more practical and specific things we can work on together. We are happy to carry on that conversation. I also refer to the informal session we had with the committee last week. We ran out of time then, but I hope the members will agree that one of the key things we put on the table and one of the key policy asks of Dóchas members was gender. There were many more concerns, however, so I hope we will get the chance to work with the committee members in that regard.

More importantly, I hope today the members got a sense of the important role that Irish NGOs are playing, as well as the important role of the diversity of the Dóchas membership. My team and I are here and available if the committee members have questions and if there are issues that they want to tackle more and bring such a conversation together. We are grateful for this opportunity this morning and let us hope we can continue this partnership.

I thank the members of the committee and all the panellists at this morning's session.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Keatinge. I also thank Ms Van Lieshout for co-ordinating this meeting. I again express my appreciation to Dóchas and all the agencies for the work they continue to do, especially since they are now doing that work in the context of a global pandemic. It is clear from the contributions this morning, our engagement and the international reporting community that the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on women and girls is a matter of deep concern. It is most worrying, whether those impacts are in the areas of health, education and-or food security and nutrition or in the context of gender-based violence. The impact of Covid-19, while not yet fully assessed, is most stark, and that is why this committee felt our engagement this morning was so important.

I have no doubt that this is an issue that the members of this committee will be returning to, and I note the interest of Deputy Clarke and others. I expect this subject will be on our agenda again as we move towards the summer and, hopefully, a clear pathway emerges regarding how the international community will be able to deal with the scourge of Covid-19. This committee will continue to prioritise the implementation of our report, which was published within the last ten days, on ensuring an equitable distribution of vaccines throughout the world, especially in areas of considerable disadvantage and less development. On behalf of the committee, I thank the witnesses for their engagement and for dealing with our queries. I thank them even more for leaving us with several priority takeaways we will be keen to work on.

The joint committee adjourned at 11.05 a.m. until 11 a.m. on Thursday, 25 March 2021.