

GENDER, COVID-19 AND WOMEN IN NUCLEAR

THOUGHTS BY AMB. ALICIA BUENROSTRO MASSIEU

Permanent Representative of Mexico to International Organizations in Vienna

I would like to share a few thoughts on how the COVID-19 pandemic, gender equality, and our work as the Group of Friends all come together.

When we last met in February, I remember there was optimism regarding the year ahead and the agenda for gender equality. Just before COVID-19 forced us into lock-down, there was a great momentum behind greater gender equality at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and in the nuclear field in general.

IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi had made a clear commitment to reach gender parity at the Agency by 2025, and the IAEA launched the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship Programme, on the occasion of International Women's Day.

My country, Mexico, France and UN-Women were hard at work preparing the 2020 Generation Equality Forum to chart a road map to accelerate progress towards gender equality, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the Beijing Declaration.

And then the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to put the world on hold.

This crisis has, on the one hand, exposed the urgency of addressing gender inequality, and, on the other, offered us an opportunity to build back better.

On the first point: The health emergency caused by the pandemic has revealed that women are in the front lines of our societies and our economies.

Throughout the crisis, women have been front and center as "essential workers": as healthcare professionals, community volunteers, working in supermarkets and in cleaning crews. Women also bear a great deal of responsibility for holding societies together, be it at home, in healthcare, at school, or in caring for the elderly.

But while women bear these responsibilities, they have also been particularly exposed, as they are overrepresented among informal and low-income workers. Women have also lost more ground across countries, and are more affected by unemployment, reflecting the fact that we are more likely to work in services that require interacting with people.

This conjunction of responsibility and vulnerability exposes structural inequalities that need to be addressed.

On the second point: The emergency response to the pandemic, the so-called transition into the “new-normal” and the relaunching of social and economic activities have allowed us to question the status quo and to reimagine the way we do things in order to build back better.

At a practical level, what does this all mean for us, as the Group of Friends?

- It means that we have the opportunity to regain momentum and optimism.
- It makes sense to continue to push for flexible working arrangements that allow for an inclusive workplace. We know that working remotely works well, that there are potential productivity gains, and that the burdens at home can and must be shared among women and men.
- It makes sense to make use of the technology at our disposal to reach out to a wider pool of candidates when recruiting, to interview women who may be further away.
- It makes sense to train and mentor women using digital platforms.
- It also makes sense to build wider and more inclusive scientific communities. In this regard, I would like to point out that there have been many valuable virtual events, including a series of webinars on “[COVID-19 and Gender Equality](#)” by the International Gender Champions; the online conference on “[SDGs and COVID-19: the Role of Science, Technology and Innovation](#)” –co-organized by Barbados, Czech Republic, Estonia, Ghana, Israel, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Rwanda, US partners, and others-; and webinars organized by WINS and CNS, among many others.

It is evident that it is more urgent than ever to accelerate the inclusion of women in STEM fields, in general, and in nuclear, in particular. We need to have all great minds coming up with solutions to our pressing global challenges –from COVID-19, to poverty and inequality, and to nuclear conflict-, all while ensuring there are fewer blind spots.

As a last word of caution: Crises like this one sometimes tempt us to retreat and close ourselves off from the world. However, it is precisely a pandemic such as the current one that underline our common humanity.

As we go back to the Board of Governors and the IAEA machine gets going again, we, as the Group of Friends for Women in Nuclear, must make sure that gender stays on the agenda as a matter of priority, and we must make sure that we build back better for all of us.

Background on the Group of Friends for Women in Nuclear

The group of Friends for Women in Nuclear was announced on 15 June 2017 at a meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors (BoG). The Group was formed to promote a collective effort to increase, through practical initiatives, the representation of women in the IAEA Secretariat.

Group members

Afghanistan	Germany	Philippines
Argentina	India	Republic of Korea
Australia	Ireland	Slovak Republic
Austria	Japan	Slovenia
Belgium	Jordan	South Africa
Canada	Lithuania	Spain
Colombia	Malaysia	Sweden
Costa Rica	Mexico	Turkey
Denmark	Netherlands	United Kingdom
Finland	New Zealand	United States of America
France	Norway	
Georgia	Paraguay	

Membership in the Group is open to all member states of the IAEA upon application. A member state interested in joining the group should make their interest known to one of the Group's co-chairs.

The IAEA Secretariat takes part in the work, meetings and consultations of the Group. Other organizations, such as Women in Nuclear (WiN) are also consulted in the work of the Group.