
KEEPING OUR PROMISE





IN THE BALANCE

The instability that a global pandemic causes is uncharted territory. This crisis stretches worldwide and has left humanity at a critical crossroads: change everything or risk staying the same. Many of our lives have been turned upside down, our futures shrouded in darkness and uncertainty. For women in countries at war, this uncertainty is routine. The existing, long-term challenges we face as a global community are exacerbated in times of crisis—and as with all crises, the impacts

of COVID-19 are deeply gendered. Without a global network of support, women will be left to defend themselves and their families against yet another life-threatening danger. You helped us weave this network for vulnerable women all over the world. Because of you, the women we serve were ready to face the pandemic head-on. And with your help, they can continue to move forward against COVID-19 and against uncertainty.

AN INVISIBLE THREAT

They were at home when it happened. Gunshots rang through the air, and Saratu and her husband peered outside. Their neighbors were running away from their village, scattering in different directions. Saratu and her husband joined them in a panic and hid nearby where they watched Boko Haram insurgents burn down their home, murder their neighbors, and wipe away their life in one swift motion.

Forced to flee their home in Borno State, Nigeria, Saratu and her husband eventually settled with a friend in nearby Bauchi State. Traumatized by violence and fear, Saratu faced her new life filled with uncertainty. She and her husband set out to rebuild their lives with meager resources and little support.

After a shaky beginning in her new community, during which she had to close her bean paste business, Saratu discovered Women for Women International. As a participant, she thrived. In just a few months, she not only changed the way that she and her family maintain their personal hygiene, she also started to plan wholesome meals, joined a Village Savings and Loan Association with her fellow women, and revitalized her business. As her business knowledge flourished, Saratu expanded to new markets, keeping detailed transaction and expense records, practicing quality customer relations, and extending credit to trustworthy customers.

Saratu's husband joined our Men's Engagement Program and quickly became an ally of Saratu and the other women in his life. He began to help with

chores and embraced Saratu's entitlement to inheritance. People like you from around the world came together to fuel the rebuilding of Saratu's life, and the generosity that she received encouraged her to return the favor. In celebration of International Women's Day, with other women in her training group, Saratu made fabrics for two people in her village with disabilities. She has found her place in a network of women just like herself who have suffered intense trauma at the hands of conflict.

Saratu changed her life in ways she couldn't fathom while battling the threats of her old life. Her business was booming, her husband opened to her, her children were healthy. And then something happened.

A new danger has presented itself, and this threat is invisible. Like so many others around the world, Saratu knows the peril that COVID-19 puts her family in. Unlike others, Saratu faces greater risks as the disease compounds with already volatile circumstances in her country. COVID-19 affects her livelihood, food security, mental health, and community. It will continue to do damage even after a vaccine reaches Nigeria. But she's fighting. Her experience as a participant in our signature program has armed her with business skills, a network of women to share information and empathy, and resources to build her future and push the boundaries of development in her community. Saratu, like thousands of our participants around the world, is using her skills to combat this pandemic, but she can't do it alone.



Women for Women International knows that crises create and intensify gender inequality and power disparity. As lockdowns are enforced and infrastructure meant to enable our work sits idle, our teams have discovered different ways to fulfill our mission and support extraordinarily vulnerable women.

By the beginning of April, as stay-home orders and curfews rolled out across the globe, our staff had transitioned to remote operations. Prior to pausing programming, our staff created plans with their participants for the coming weeks so

they could continue to practice preventative hygiene to block virus spread, receive information, and maintain access to food. We maintained existing pipelines for cash transfers so women could have income at this critical moment. The women in our programs know the risks of sheltering in place: social isolation, increased domestic violence, scarce resources, and reduced personal agency. Staff worked swiftly to remind women of the lessons learned in their programs and how to reach for support beyond the walls of their homes even if they couldn't physically.



With the support of sponsors like you, a class of sisters in Nigeria decided to provide five widows in their community with essentials, such as packets of seasoning, soap, and maize to help them through this difficult time.

"I am very thankful for what we learned from you about how to manage our spending and saving money. It has come in handy in these difficult days. We spend the money that we have saved on essential things."
—Bahar*
*Name has been changed to protect participant's identity.

PIVOTING WITH PURPOSE

Lifting women up in times of crisis is in our DNA, but what defines us is human connection as a direct service. Because our frontline staff are often from the communities where they work, they form trustworthy relationships with the women in our programs. Now, we must safeguard that connection while women are mostly confined

to their homes. Each country office has approached this uniquely, considering the specific needs of their communities. Regardless of individual circumstance, the blow dealt by COVID-19 will be felt sharply in countries already plagued by struggling economies and ongoing conflict.

Women's groups in Bosnia used their learned skills to sew face masks to support essential workers like hospital staff and police.

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

KOSOVO

Our Kosovo team works with government response to provide information on handwashing, social distancing, and dispelling misinformation via radio networks.

To combat the psychological strain from police-enforced lockdowns, our Iraq staff provide mental health and gender-based violence referrals and help women navigate health services that have shifted to mostly virtual outreach.

AFGHANISTAN

Over 4,700 participants received hygiene kits in Afghanistan that contain toilet tissue, hand sanitizer, gloves, and soap.

Almost every woman in our Iraq program stays connected with trainers through telephone calls, phone trees, and apps like WhatsApp, Viber, and Facebook.

IRAQ

Under lockdown, gender-based violence has increased. Our Nigeria team addresses individual reports of GBV to provide resources for women to seek help.

NIGERIA

Our team in South Sudan quickly adapted our weekly public radio talk show to share critical COVID-19 information with listeners.

SOUTH SUDAN

To work around limited communication infrastructure, our DRC team drove through remote villages and provided information and updates through a loudspeaker to reach women who might not have access to radio programs.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

RWANDA

In Rwanda, our team made a major push to get every woman a SIM card so she could receive cash transfers via mobile banking and remain in touch with her trainers and peers.

Women in our Women's Opportunity Center joined national government initiatives to make face masks. As of June 2020, they had produced almost 30,000.

OUR 2020 GOALS

This pandemic has highlighted the power of connections at the community and household level; the kind of connections women can rely on. Our direct line to women in conflict-affected areas and the adaptability of our training make the learning and skills that women receive widely applicable. But above all, one thing has proved itself to be the most important facet of our mission: investing in women's power. It's what we've been doing for almost three decades, and it's why our program works. COVID-19 exacerbated existing inequalities in all of Women for Women International's contexts and forced us to adapt according to these unpredictable changes so women in our program can continue to achieve their goals.

It starts with women's voices. We listen to them to provide the right support and help them amplify their voices to change and protect their communities. Providing information and updates as

part of emergency COVID-19 response proved effective in the immediate shock of the pandemic, and these emergency communication pipelines became kickoff points for us. They have shown us new ways to use mobile phones and other communication technology to build women's strength through emotional support, referrals, and continued cash assistance. The relationships women form with each other and staff shatter the silence and isolation of war, disease, violence, and distance. By listening, we tailor support for each woman in each program in each country.

2020 offers an opportunity to evolve how we invest in women, and it's when women in our program will need the greatest boost. By June, our online programming in Iraq had enrolled over 500 women and as of July 2020, our typical in-person group trainings have resumed with enhanced safety measures in some locations, while we strengthen the capacity of women leaders to share power with those around them. We'll continue adapting our programs for the ever-changing circumstances to walk with women as they transform our world.

To continue to adapt, we will:



Explore and establish new methods of program delivery with an emphasis on digital solutions



Bring actors together to ensure a holistic approach to COVID-19 response and recovery



Collect context-specific data to learn about and highlight the impact that COVID-19 is having on marginalized women in conflict-affected areas



Strengthen context-specific health, legal, and psychological referrals information and service access for GBV survivors



Reopen safe in-person training when appropriate on a condensed timeline



Enroll additional classes of women in the program later this year

BEYOND 2020

History reminds us that while great disruption brings rapid change, it also brings opportunities for new practices, methods, and ideas. As always, Women for Women International finds what ideas and methods work and which don't, and incorporates what works into our programs. These changes make us more flexible and efficient, more prepared than ever to provide resources to women in any crisis.

We can't know how 2020 will affect program outcomes until the new year, but we are encouraged when we hear that women use tools and skills they've strengthened in our programs to enhance their own economic and social power, and that's what we want to protect. No matter what else the future brings, our goal to partner with every woman so she has an equal, fighting chance at a full life remains at our core. As we transition from immediate response to recovery and long-term planning, we will not lose sight of our collective goals and will continue to develop strong programs to meet them.

In the coming years, our goals include:

Ensuring every woman in our program has access to remote communication (e.g. mobile phone, SIM card, service plan, etc.) so she may stay connected and potentially receive cash assistance

Innovating ways to share critical information to complement our in-person social and economic development training where women traditionally build social safety nets

Investing deeper in women's economic empowerment and financial inclusion to increase resilience in times of economic instability, such as continued coaching after graduation to earn and save more money

Prioritizing violence prevention and recovery, acknowledging the increased risk of violence that women affected by conflict face during times of crisis

Advocating for policies in post-conflict areas that are inclusive of women and context-specific



OUR PROMISE TO KEEP

We look forward to the day we can leave this pandemic in the past and resume our program with new knowledge and forward momentum. Unfortunately, after COVID-19 subsides, so will the world's attention, and women will be left again without life-sustaining necessities like food and water in a community that puts their needs and voice last.

Many of us have seen or heard these words a lot lately, "now more than ever," but when it comes to women's equality, these words are true. We must invest in women now more than ever, because in this crisis, women's rights are most at risk. And we are in a moment of opportunity for women—including and especially those most affected by conflict—to lead and be at the table where global decisions are made.

Saratu, who once rebuilt her life around her and her family, grew her fledgling business into a flourishing enterprise, and webbed a network of women in her

community, has now been relegated to the same tenuous life she held before. Her business closed once again after her sales dropped dramatically; she fears her family will soon run out of food; she is aware domestic violence plagues the women in her community; and she can no longer be with her centering force: her friends and family.

But she's still moving forward. Saratu has maintained careful hygiene and social distancing practices; she has used her stipend to buy food to last; she works with her fellow participants to stay in contact virtually; she knows that Women for Women International is working to give her what she needs to thrive even under these circumstances.

Our world is straining to regain its feet and find balance. We know the will to push forward can be hard to muster, but there are women who need the world to keep spinning, who need us to keep our promise.

Solidarity is strength in the face of a crisis.

Our greatest advantage is meeting women where they are, in their communities. Even when we can't physically stand with women, solidarity is possible.

And you have built this bond. You have reinforced our connections and programs with resources of your own.

You, standing with our women, have given them the support to face this pandemic. The women in our programs trust that people like you are fighting for them around the world. This pandemic has closed many doors for many people, but it's also presented new doors, yet to be opened. You can open these doors for women fighting to stay alive and build the future.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

If you'd like to learn more about your role in our global support network for women facing conflict and how you can continue to open doors, please reach out to us.

Thank you for your allyship and commitment to the power of marginalized women everywhere. Thank you for helping us keep our promise.

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One woman can change anything.
Many women can change everything.





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