

# COVID-19 as a policy window: policy entrepreneurs responding to violence against women

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## Abstract

Policy windows emerge through alignment among specific policy problems, political forces, and proposed policy responses. During policy windows, it becomes possible for change to occur, driven by the agenda-setting of policy entrepreneurs. We consider how the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) created a significant policy window. As we do so, we seek to advance theorization of the conditions under which policy change occurs and when it sticks. We ground this discussion in exploration of a salient policy matter: responding to violence against women (VAW). Shortly after the World Health Organization declared the spread of COVID-19 a global pandemic, in April 2020, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuke, Executive Director of United Nations (UN) Women—the entity of the UN dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women—coined VAW the “shadow pandemic” and launched a global public awareness campaign. We review the advocacy work that led in 2020 to broader recognition of VAW as a significant policy problem. That advocacy has driven policy changes at local and national levels that are intended to have long-term, trajectory-altering impacts on reducing violence. We conclude by drawing insights to guide theory-driven empirical analysis of other policy windows.

**Keywords:** policy window, multiple streams model, policy entrepreneurs, COVID-19, violence against women

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has caused enormous turmoil and tragedy. Governments around the world have sought to respond to this systemic shock through a variety of policy actions. No matter their effectiveness, these actions have made explicit the fundamental responsibility of the state to protect citizens from harm. Shortly after the World Health Organization declared the spread of COVID-19 a global pandemic, in April 2020, following a speech by the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, the Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuke, coined violence against women (VAW) the “shadow pandemic” and launched a global public awareness campaign (UN Women, 2020a). Forecast modeling in late April 2020 by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA, 2020) predicted that for every 3 months that government-enforced COVID-19 restrictions continued, an additional 15 million cases of domestic violence would occur worldwide. This drew attention to the global increase in VAW amid the COVID-19 health crisis. We consider COVID-19 as a policy window and explore how it led to changes in government responses to VAW.

John Kingdon (1984/2011) discussed how policy windows emerge through alignment among specific policy problems, political forces, and proposed policy responses. During policy windows, it becomes possible for change to occur, driven by the agenda-setting of policy entrepreneurs. Crises have long been seen as creating policy windows. Here, we seek to advance theorization of the conditions under which policy change happens, noting that pre-conditions also matter in opening spaces for policy change. To do so, we review the advocacy work that led in 2020 to broader recognition of VAW as a significant global policy problem. That advocacy work has driven policy changes at local and national levels that are intended to have long-term impacts on reducing violence.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we review Kingdon's conception of the policy window and how it fits within his broader theory of policy change. We then consider COVID-19 as a policy window, noting the range of factors that influence the opening and closing of opportunities for driving policy change. This sets the context for introducing the case study of VAW and why this was termed as the "shadow pandemic." After explaining the details of this phenomenon, we discuss how policy entrepreneurs, specifically UN Women, acted to promote greater awareness of the heightened problem during the pandemic and to spur, secure, and diffuse policy change. We then present several examples of novel policy responses that occurred in 2020 with the purpose of reducing and preventing VAW. Here, we give special attention to evidence of COVID-19 as a "trajectory altering" event that accelerated policy changes. These are changes that can be expected to have ongoing, positive social consequences that will outlast the COVID-19 pandemic and the shadow pandemic as a result of COVID-19 government restrictions.

From here, we draw three lessons on policy windows and policy entrepreneurship. First, the pandemic did not provide a shortcut for policy advocacy. UN Women and others who made the most of COVID-19 as a policy window tended to have been working for years to draw government attention to the need to address VAW. Path-clearing knowledge-building efforts, the building of capacity in the form of advocacy coalitions, and honing of skills in policy entrepreneurship all allowed UN Women and some country-based counterparts to recognize the window of opportunity for policy change and use it effectively. Second, ambition matters to what is achieved during a policy window. If you seek major and permanent shifts, then you are more likely to secure policy change that is trajectory altering. Third, strategic problem framing is vital for changing policy discussions. But agenda-setting efforts can be greatly assisted by efforts to garner a macro understanding of the problem at hand, to monitor jurisdiction-specific policy changes, and to rapidly disseminate information. The global diffusion of policy innovation in this instance was remarkable. These lessons are intended to be of use both to researchers seeking to better understand the political dynamics associated with policy change and to practitioners—especially those who identify as policy entrepreneurs.

## Kingdon's conception of the policy window

In his influential book, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, John Kingdon (1984/2011) developed a "process streams" model of policymaking. The model contained three broadly independent streams—politics, problems, and policy ideas. Kingdon argued that, in any given policy domain, there are brief periods—the "policy windows"—where an alignment can be perceived between political conditions, a specific problem at hand, and the existence of a policy idea that could provide an effective solution to that problem. Kingdon further claimed that policy entrepreneurs—actors who can be inside or outside of government and who work closely with others—are able to perceive these windows of opportunity and use them to promote their favored policy solution onto governmental decision-making agendas. "[S]olutions come to be coupled with problems, proposals linked with political exigencies, and alternatives introduced when the agenda changes" (p. 173). It is useful to quote Kingdon more fully on the nature of policy windows.

The policy window is an opportunity for advocates of proposals to push their pet solutions, or to push attention to their special problems. Indeed ... advocates lie in wait in and around government with their solutions at hand, waiting for problems to float by to which they can attach their solutions, waiting for a development in the political stream they can use to their advantage. Sometimes the window opens quite predictably. The scheduled renewal of a program, for instance, creates an opportunity for many participants to push their pet project or concern. At other times, it happens quite unpredictably.

Policy entrepreneurs must be prepared, their pet proposal at the ready, their special problem well-documented, lest the opportunity pass them by (p. 165).

Kingdon's conception of the policy window, and his explanation of how policy advocates might exploit those windows, is helpful for explaining many conditions under which policy changes occur. But it is important to note that windows of opportunity in policymaking are social constructions and perceiving that a window is open, or is about to open, calls for a great deal of expert judgment. Likewise, how to exploit the policy window also takes a lot of expertise. So what appears as a policy window to one person or one group of people might not appear as a policy window to others. Furthermore, while some people might be adept at exploiting the window of opportunity that they have perceived, others could fumble and see the opportunity pass them by.

Other theories of the policy process are also relevant for explaining policy change during COVID-19. Incrementalism [as popularized by Lindblom (1959) and Wildavsky (1964)] reminds us that change agents tend to have more traction when their proposals for change are compatible with and build on existing policies, norms, and frameworks. Institutionalism—as presented in distinctive yet compatible ways by, among others, March & Olsen (1989) and Ostrom (2005)—reminds us that all policy change occurs within broader structures of rules and norms. Change agents must be conscious of, in Ostrom's words, how “rules are nested in another set of rules that define how the first set of rules can be changed” (2005, p. 25). As March and Olsen point out, such rules often operate as informal “logics of appropriateness” (March & Olsen, 1989, 2009) that structure interactions among policymakers and define opportunity structures within any given policymaking context. Punctuated equilibrium, a theory of policy change popularized by Baumgartner & Jones (1993), alerts us to the prospect of rapid change and how, to a significant degree, change agents through their prior actions can frame the terms of reference within which future policy options are discussed. This theory of change deliberately builds upon aspects of incrementalism and Kingdon's multiple streams framework. In the process, it underscores how specific moments of change result in major adjustments from the previously prevailing status quo. That is what we mean in the present discussion when we consider policy changes as “trajectory altering.” In the language of historical institutionalism (Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000), we might call such moments “critical junctures” (Capocchia, 2015). The Advocacy Coalition Framework, developed and advanced by Sabatier (1988), alerts us to the diversity of actors that make up policy communities and the importance of relationships and norms established over years within those communities for shaping the kinds of policy changes deemed admissible at any given time. Finally, the more recent Narrative Policy Framework (Jones & McBeth, 2010) reminds us of the power of the storytelling devices that policy actors use to influence the preferences of policymaking communities and drive policy change (see also Stone, 1997).

When considered alongside other theories of the policymaking process, we see that Kingdon's multiple streams framework not only continues to provide a useful way of understanding policy change but that key aspects of it are compatible with other well-established theories of policy change. In the years since Kingdon developed his conception of policy change processes, other scholars have gone to some lengths to elaborate on key aspects of it and give it further empirical support. For example, Nikolaos Zahariadis has written at length about the multiple streams framework (e.g., Herweg et al., 2018), noting its broad applicability to explaining instances of policy change. Likewise, Michael Mintrom and others have investigated aspects of policy entrepreneurship (e.g., Mintrom, 2019). From these investigations of policy entrepreneurship, we now understand a lot about the work that policy entrepreneurs undertake to promote policy change. That work can involve problem framing, working with advocacy coalitions, making effective use of policy networks, collection of relevant policy evidence, and the diffusion of knowledge concerning policy innovations to promote change in multiple jurisdictions. In addition to these contributions from the broad field of policy studies, we note the relevance of international relations theories of normative change (True and Wiener (2019)), the role of international organizations (Finnemore, 1993) and foreign policy leaders (Davies & True, 2017) as norm entrepreneurs, and transnational advocacy networks (Htun & Laurel Weldon, 2012; True & Mintrom, 2001) as mechanisms of diffusion. We draw on these theoretical contributions as our discussion proceeds.

## COVID-19 as a policy window

During the COVID-19 pandemic, political observers and organizational leaders would often be heard repeating the saying, “never let a good crisis go to waste.” The phrase has been attributed to various people—including Winston Churchill, because “it sounds like something he would say.” The phrase is relevant to this discussion. The implication is that somehow a crisis can always be exploited in ways that will advance a specific agenda. But Kingdon’s conception of the policy window encourages us to be considerably more judicious in how we think about any given crisis and the degree to which it might be exploited to advance an agenda. Any crisis might fall into Kingdon’s “problem” stream, but for that crisis to then trigger specific policy change, there must be an alignment of political will and the availability of a viable and appealing policy response to the problem.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in many temporary changes to standard practices in many areas of society, including within the government. During 2020, it was commonplace to see parliamentary and legislative processes being suspended in the interests of maintaining social distancing. Consequently, many of the usual routines of policy development, ministerial briefings, and committee hearings were abandoned. While new problems emerged through the crisis that certainly did call for rapid responses—some of which could be claimed as policy innovations—it is also fair to conclude that the crisis curtailed many opportunities for broader policy discussion. It also engendered a lot of making of “policy on the fly,” which can create various unintended consequences. While it would be a stretch to say that everything became about COVID-19 and how to limit its spread, it is absolutely clear that the crisis has preoccupied the minds of political leaders everywhere. And certainly, COVID-19 has opened some space for new policy discussions. To the extent that COVID-19 has been a policy window, the window has been by no means universal. Furthermore, if we return to Kingdon’s conception, we might expect that some policy windows that were opened by the pandemic were not perceived as such and, therefore, were not exploited.

There is no reason to claim that COVID-19 created universally more favorable conditions for policy change. That said, considering some of the instances where policy change did occur during the pandemic can generate lessons concerning the nature of contemporary politics and policymaking. For example, COVID-19 appears to have created conditions favorable to policy changes driving improvements in crisis preparedness (Coccia, 2022; Dobrowolski, 2020), the hastened introduction and enhancement of E-Government platforms (Hodzic et al., 2021; Mensah et al., 2021), and remote access to mental health and crisis counseling services (Kopelovich et al., 2021; Moreno et al., 2020). However, to the extent that policy change will stick in these instances, we believe much of that will be due to certain propitious pre-conditions, which include policy advocacy efforts that long preceded the onset of the pandemic. In the remainder of this paper, we draw lessons from our case analysis of UN Women’s policy entrepreneurship on VAW globally and how significant national policy changes in this area occurred in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## The “shadow pandemic” of violence against women

VAW was a well-documented problem before the COVID-19 pandemic, considered a national crisis in some countries and described as a global epidemic by the [World Health Organisation, 2013](#). UN Women has long been active in monitoring country-level activities and calling for prevention practices in this space (e.g., [UN Women, 2012](#)). UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres (2018) already coined VAW a global pandemic in 2018. However, the onset of the pandemic and government restrictions to prevent the spread of the virus changed the nature and the prevalence of domestic and family violence, increased the barriers to help-seeking, and reduced access to services. Reports from different countries around the world revealed stories of perpetrators “weaponizing” the global health crisis and utilizing restrictions to exert further control over women’s movements and decision-making. At a time of acknowledged higher risk for women experiencing violence, it became a significant issue that governments’ primary method for suppressing the spread of the virus, namely through stay-at-home restrictions (“sheltering in place”), put women at much higher risk than usual of experiencing domestic and family violence.

On 5 April, 2020, the Secretary-General made a video speech sent to member states around the world in which he drew attention to the “horrifying global surge in domestic violence” directed toward women and girls, linked to lockdowns imposed by governments responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

He called for a “ceasefire” on VAW and violence against girls, akin to that on armed conflict, and urged “all governments to make the prevention and redress of VAW a key part of their national response plans for COVID-19.” Specifically, he encouraged governments to make the following policy changes: (i) [I]ncreasing investment in online services and civil society organizations; (ii) making sure judicial systems continue to prosecute abusers; (iii) setting up emergency warning systems in pharmacies and grocery stores; (iv) declaring shelters as essential services; and (v) creating safe ways for women to seek support, without alerting their abusers (UN Secretary-General, 2020).

Following this speech in April 2020, the chief executive of UN Women, Phumzile coined VAW, a “shadow pandemic.” UN Women aimed to dispel the notion that home is a safe place and became a global policy entrepreneur by taking up the Secretary-General’s mandate and advocating for policy change to effectively respond to the shadow pandemic. To that point, most governments had responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with the mantra, “Stay safe, stay home.” In so doing, they displayed a lack of understanding that home is not necessarily the safest place for people, especially for many women and children, despite at least two decades of political rhetoric and discussion on the need to address VAW at national and international levels (Bradbury-Jones and Isham, 2020).

## Policy entrepreneurs and the prevention of violence against women

John Kingdon observed that “[p]olicy entrepreneurs play a major part in the coupling at the open policy window, attaching solutions to problems, overcoming the constraints by redrafting proposals, and taking advantage of politically propitious events” (pp. 165–66). “Earlier, we noted strategies of policy entrepreneurs that tend to increase their chances of attaining success when pushing for policy change. These include problem framing, working with advocacy coalitions, making effective use of policy networks, collection of relevant policy evidence, and the diffusion of knowledge concerning policy innovations to promote change in multiple jurisdictions.” Here, we show how UN Women, through actions led by Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuke, were consistent with prior expectations of how a policy entrepreneur would seize a policy window to drive significant policy change.

Acting as a policy entrepreneur and diffuser, the UN called on governments globally to make women’s safety a priority in responses to COVID-19, supported by six strategies. First, consistent with the strategy of problem framing, the UN created a public service campaign to promote awareness of the problem of VAW and influence individuals and policymakers. This included making a 60-s high impact film, fronted by actress Kate Winslet, in a partnership with private media and marketing companies (MRM, Getty Images, and Craft) and members of the Unstereotype Alliance (which works to remove harmful gender stereotypes from advertising and media content).<sup>1</sup> They empowered governments at all levels to change their messaging around “stay home stay safe” and encouraged COVID-19-specific public awareness campaigns about the harm of domestic violence, emboldening bystanders and neighbors to call out abuse. Following the campaign, in May 2020, the Australian state of Victoria changed its public health campaign across all television and social media from stay home, stay safe to “Victoria: Call it out: Respect each other.” The campaigns aimed to empower bystanders and neighbors to call out VAW during pandemic lockdowns especially.

Second, consistent with tapping the capability of existing advocacy coalitions, UN Women promoted ready-made and innovative new solutions. Various government sector agencies and nongovernmental organizations also supported these efforts by sharing their solutions, and a new cadre of researchers brought together through a “gender and COVID” international working group on gender-based violence (GBV), were effective in further framing the problem. These collective efforts were crucial in shoring up the political support required to rapidly secure the funding to implement these solutions (and to reverse some contrary messaging such as “stay at home” in all situations).

Third, consistent with making effective use of policy networks and gathering information through those networks, UN Women assembled evidence from across countries and regions documenting the impacts of COVID-19 on VAW as a universal, global problem. In particular, UN Women conducted 52 rapid assessment surveys to get a snapshot of the types and severity of violence occurring, among other COVID-19 gender impacts. The UN Socioeconomic Framework on COVID-19 (2020, pp. 41–3) required key indicators for supporting human rights compliant policy responses and for monitoring and early warning of the human rights implications of COVID-19 (also OHCHR, 2020). A key concern was to ensure

<sup>1</sup> See the UN public campaign video at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llNP\\_bW-o0&t=5s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llNP_bW-o0&t=5s), accessed 18 July 2021.

gender-specific interventions and protection to mitigate the impact of the crisis on women and girls, including on their protection from domestic and other forms of GBV. As part of rapid assessment tools and methodologies to generate community data, one indicator for monitoring focused on the number of recorded cases of physical, sexual, or psychological VAW and violence against girls and boys, elderly, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons (LGBTI), including offline and online violence and violence by intimate partners during the pandemic and proportion of these victims that have access to appropriate services and interventions.

Fourth, consistent with the strategy of diffusing knowledge concerning policy innovations, UN Women promoted readily implementable solutions in the short term. In line with the Secretary-General's April speech, they recommended that governments respond by developing innovative ways for women to safely seek help without alerting their abusers, by investing in local service providers and by declaring domestic and family violent safe houses and shelters "essential services." The French government responded by partnering with grocery stores to provide pop-up counseling services, recognizing that women may not be able to access helplines safely within their homes. They also funded 20,000 hotel rooms to provide temporary accommodation to women in need. Furthermore, UN Women in particular provided guidance empowering police and courts to prosecute abusers and avoid releasing prisoners convicted of VAW.

Fifth, and again consistent with the strategy of diffusing knowledge concerning policy innovations, the UN promoted gender-sensitive policy responses affecting the medium and longer-term recovery from COVID-19. Furthermore, in September 2020, it established a COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker to monitor and assess COVID-19 government policies for their gender-responsiveness to the needs of women and girls, including to VAW. The tracker was developed to spur actual and effective policy implementation and offer a database of examples of government policies introduced to protect women and children from the negative impacts of the pandemic.

Sixth, "introducing a significant innovation to knowledge collection and diffusion," UN Women employed the COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker platform not only to analyze policies and highlight gaps, but to more systematically document and share promising and innovative policies and inspire government and civil society organizations around the globe to adopt new policies and practices. UN "Women Count" program lead, Dr Laura Turquet stated that, "[o]ur hope is that governments will use this trove of policy data to learn from others about what can be done and to significantly up their game" (Turquet et al., 2021). UN Women's policy entrepreneurship has enabled global diffusion and learning with some demonstrable impacts.

## Policy responses during the pandemic to violence against women

The universal impact of COVID-19 on VAW in every country and jurisdiction was readily apparent soon after the COVID-19 lockdowns were in place, in part due to UN Women's global documentation and campaign (Taub, 2020). Increases were noted in reported incidences of VAW by victims and perpetrators and in first-time reports/cases compared with before the government lockdowns in UN Women's rapid assessment surveys and by national and local protection services and hotlines. Greater severity of violence was also reported. Five months after the release in April 2020 of the UN guidelines on how to respond to the shadow pandemic, by September 2020, 135 had countries responded positively with new COVID-related measures to combat VAW. They began by declaring providers of support for victims of domestic violence "essential services." This included shelters.

For example, Fiji responded to the UN call and UN Women's assistance by designating frontline providers in this area as "essential services." The Fijian Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation launched a nationwide communications campaign on television and radio with influential leaders and via mobile text to raise awareness of the shadow pandemic. Two new working groups were formed, one focused on GBV against women in response to COVID-19, which developed a Resource Kit and virtual training to guide frontline responders on responding to GBV and child protection cases during COVID-19 and community-based response and referral guidelines to ensure that non-GBV specialists and those doing outreach in communities knew how to respond to VAW and violence against children (Government of Fiji, 2020). In addition, the Fijian Ministry collected national data on increased demand to helplines and services and partnered with civil society and women's rights organizations.



Countries also began developing new modes of identifying at-risk victims/survivors as suggested by UN Women and illustrated by the creation of supermarket/pharmacy code words for victims taken up in Spain in April and wildly diffused around the world (UN Women 2020b). Responses included top-ups to existing services; increased funding to support remote service delivery in light of increased demand; and innovative technology-based support services to address the lack of access to safe spaces (Fornari et al., 2021). For instance, the Australian Government provided \$150 million for additional support to online domestic violence services while the state of Victoria created a new pilot housing scheme for perpetrators. This was done after it was found that police were reluctant to remove perpetrators from homes during COVID lockdowns (Pfitzner et al., 2020). Police checks were also routinely introduced on high-risk households already known to the VAW service sector in Victoria, Australia.

In Argentina, a range of policy innovations were introduced to address increased reports of VAW during the lockdown period. These innovations built from a strong foundation of innovative policy work in this space championed by the Ministry of Women, Genders, and Diversity, and from UN Women's global policy advocacy. The Argentinian Ministry reinforced its inter-institutional and inter-sectoral coordination and communication across the country. For example, it convened federal forums with subnational governments and international conversations with other countries, and international and domestic civil society and community-based organizations. It also conducted online campaigns in line with UN Women's April 2020 campaign, displaying a clear awareness of the social dynamics that are typically associated with GBV. These appealed to the co-responsibility of care and redistribution of domestic tasks when all household members were confined indoors. The campaigns were part of a comprehensive strategy of the ministry's policy agenda focused on recognizing the value of emotional labor in the household, which is often overlooked in discussions of labor in society and VAW (Polischuk & Fay, 2020).

Bespoke, gender-responsive cash transfer programs to victims/survivors and as a form of violence prevention allowing potential victims to protect themselves were also designed and implemented. For example, the UN in Indonesia managed two joint programs with the Indonesia government, the Joint Sustainable Development Goals Fund and the COVID-19 Multi-Partner Trust Fund (closed in March 2021), with social protection components seen as an effective policy strategy to support populations in the aftershock of a natural disaster or crises (UN Nations, 2021). As a result of UN Women's policy entrepreneurship, in Indonesia they were able to influence these social protection policies and programs on COVID-19 to encompass GBV protection and funding, so that victims/survivors could access cash transfers for work programs to provide for basic income and housing needs and that VAW shelters could stay open during COVID restrictions and were supported to adhere to health protocols. In addition, based on UN Women's monitoring of the COVID response, they advocated for women to play greater roles in deciding the use of money from the decentralized government social protection programs managed by the Ministry of Villages. This was to ensure systematic implementation of gender-responsive social protection and that these interventions would positively impact gender equality, thus reducing a key factor driving VAW (UN Women 2020b).<sup>2</sup>

By March 2021, another 6 months later, another 14 countries followed suit with policy innovations along these lines. Now 149 countries had introduced new policies to respond to VAW, amounting to 832 measures, more than half of which focused on services for survivors of violence. Local, subnational, and national governments worldwide had responded to UN Women's policy entrepreneurship and to national and local demands by expanding capacity and resources to deliver services remotely and virtually. An independent global rapid review of alternative entry points and service models to address GBV during COVID-19 noted that services such as 24/7 phone hotlines and web-based service delivery models such as tele-counseling and telepsychiatry were popular responses across the globe (Emezue, 2020). In some countries, the UN's guidance and reporting was crucial in prompting the government to launch an emergency response to the shadow pandemic of VAW (e.g., Government of Fiji, 2020; UN Women—Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 2020). Global analysis conducted by the McKinsey Global Institute found that women's jobs were 1.8 times more vulnerable to the crisis compared with men's jobs (Madgavkar et al., 2020), making women even more economically dependent. The negative economic impacts of the pandemic on women's employment and income were judged as inhibiting their ability to permanently escape abusive situations. In many countries, this realization resulted in policy changes. UN Women, by diffusing knowledge of possible policy solutions and innovations from

<sup>2</sup> The two programmes are the Direct Cash Transfer of Village Fund and Cash for Work of Village Fund, Personal interviews UN Women—Jakarta, 16 July 2021; Indonesia women's non-governmental organisation February, 2021.

across multiple countries and jurisdictions, facilitated that change—even though it may have been too late and too limited in some contexts.

## Evidence of “trajectory altering” policy change

UN Women has long engaged in actions characteristic of policy entrepreneurship. This allowed the organization to effectively use COVID-19 as a policy window to drive global adoption of policy innovations, some of which had been well-established in a few jurisdictions and some of which were new, introduced to address the unique circumstances created by the pandemic. Above, we noted six key actions on the part of UN Women. These were (i) promoting awareness of the problem and seeking to influence policymakers; (ii) assembling evidence from across countries and regions to document the impacts of COVID-19 on VAW as a universal, global problem; (iii) promoting readily implementable solutions in the short term; (iv) promoting gender-sensitive policy responses affecting the medium and longer-term recovery from COVID-19; (v) establishing a COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker with the UN Development Program to monitor and assess COVID-19 government policies; and (vi) using the Tracker to diffuse knowledge of promising and innovative policies around the global.

Some of the policy changes instituted to reduce and eliminate VAW during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns are potentially trajectory altering. That is to say, we anticipate that they have generated policy changes that will be permanent and that alter governmental practices and social relationships. “We especially note three important developments, all of which are consistent with expanding coalitions of support for those policy changes. Such work has been noted both in the past (e.g., Schattschneider, 1960) and more recently (e.g., Compton et al., 2019; McConnell, 2010) to be an important condition for ensuring policy changes maintain public support and stay in place for some time.” (i) These policy changes have seen new actors being involved in addressing VAW. Responsibility has been broadened beyond the immediate household and VAW frontline services. Bystanders and neighbors have been empowered to call out VAW. Community entities, including local governments, have been enlisted to support prevention in ways rarely seen before. (ii) The use of new information technologies has allowed for more widespread access to services. Some of these services have extended to providing supports to male perpetrators of VAW and enabling victims/survivors and perpetrators in remote and rural communities to access services where they previously faced financial and travel barriers to this access. (iii) Awareness-raising campaigns have resulted in greater acceptance in the community in general, and in the public health sector in particular, that VAW is an endemic problem that must be given the seriousness of other health and safety risks and integrated into pandemic and other public health emergency preparedness. There has been a heightening of recognition that VAW can and should be tackled appropriately by those with the resources and skills to do so. Here we elaborate on these points using examples.

Innovations in online service delivery have enabled the sector to reach perpetrators previously not helped or engaged with, especially first-time perpetrators. Other innovations have involved new frontline actors in prevention, such as pharmacists, neighbors, and city councils. For example, some city councils have developed violence prevention hubs. Moreover, the pandemic has brought about a new global compilation of data—driving changes such as the rapid assessment surveys and the COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker, both of which have facilitated policy learning and transfer. This Policy Response tracker established by UN Women and UN Development Program in July 2020 revealed the wide variation in government responses to VAW during the pandemic. It also has served the purpose of a policy-clearing house for governments. It collated and presented vital information on implemented policy innovations which could serve as guides to those looking to adopt new and more effective policy responses to the problems occurring in their own jurisdictions. The October 2021 report from the tracker revealed that more than 50% of 206 countries had adopted new measures to combat VAW. In contrast, less than 10% of countries and territories had enacted measures to support women’s economic security in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Change to address VAW has happened simultaneously in multiple contexts not only because of the pandemic but also as a result of the concerted data gathering and global diffusion of responses and knowledge about solutions. That work has been led and facilitated predominantly by UN Women.

We call these policy changes “trajectory altering” because there is good reason to believe that many of them have been built to last and certainly to outlast the pandemic. This is important to consider. Returning to the notion of the policy window, we see that the pandemic created a policy window



for the introduction of policies to address VAW. It is possible to imagine that many such policies could have been introduced as “temporary measures.” After all, many jurisdictions introduced emergency restrictions on personal mobility and public assembly. Quite a number also introduced special welfare payments for those significantly affected by the economic effects of lockdown measures. In contrast, trajectory-altering policy changes are those that we can expect will remain in place well beyond the months and years of the pandemic. These trajectory-altering policy changes are of special interest, because they serve to confirm that the pandemic created a policy window—one that allowed long-desired policy innovations to be accelerated onto policy agendas and then rapidly adopted and implemented with an eye to them becoming part of the “normal” policy architecture in many jurisdictions.

## Broader lessons on policy windows and policy entrepreneurship

Reflecting on the case of policy entrepreneurs and the prevention of VAW during COVID 19, we draw three key lessons. First, many advocates in many locations around the globe had long been working to draw more attention to VAW and the need for governments to take policy action to address VAW (True, 2020). Such advocates saw the COVID-19 pandemic and the ruling by governments that people must “shelter in place” as fueling conditions under which perpetrators of VAW could act in their homes with impunity, manipulating restrictions, and more frequently than would likely be the case in pre-pandemic conditions where access to help-seeking was less constrained. Crucially, these advocates used past evidence and their policy advocacy skills to push for policy change.

Second, “trajectory altering” policy change occurs only when significant advocacy efforts are undertaken toward that goal. The COVID-19 policy window did not, in itself, create conditions whereby trajectory-altering policy change would happen. Rather, this emerged from policy advocates and researchers across jurisdictions sharing evidence-based and experiential knowledge of what works, using the opportunity of COVID as a “natural experiment,” and figuring out together what kinds of strategies could contribute to the ultimate eliminating of VAW. The lesson to be drawn here concerns the nature of the normative goals and consequential policy goals that advocates establish for themselves. If you seek temporary solutions, then that is the best you will get. If you seek major and permanent shifts, then you are more likely to secure policy change that is trajectory altering. Ambition matters. But that ambition must be tethered to knowledge of what works and how to drive change within specific jurisdictions. Again, this is most likely to emerge when policy entrepreneurs from multiple jurisdictions cooperate. The role of UN Women as a facilitator of this knowledge-sharing, for example through development of the COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker, presents a compelling exemplar of what can be achieved in a policy window.

Third, as a global policy entrepreneur, UN Women was a vital support for advocates operating within specific jurisdictions. The act of naming VAW as a “shadow pandemic” was fundamental for drawing attention to the gravity of the situation. In addition, UN Women commissioned a mobile phone rapid assessment survey to garner a big picture understanding of the problem, and then also monitored jurisdiction-specific policy changes, and disseminated information about them. This is a form of policy entrepreneurship that is highly significant. It contributes in vital ways to the devising of policy solutions, and in ways that were not discussed by Kingdon (who was focused on policymaking in Washington, DC) and that have received limited attention from policy scholars. We have known for some time about how international organizations and advocacy networks have supported global policy innovation diffusion (Htun & Laurel Weldon, 2012; Simmons & Elkins, 2004; True & Mintrom, 2001). UN Women’s use of its network centrality to rapidly source, evaluate, bundle up and diffuse policy models and know-how via the COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker is a newer development. Significantly, the organisation leveraged its long-standing networking and advocacy efforts by yoking them to an easily accessed, globe-spanning internet data platform.” Much value for policy theory and policy practice could come from connecting this scholarship with theories of international normative change and diffusion. Much could also be gained from recognizing the role of global diffusers of knowledge and how their actions facilitate transnational diffusion of policy innovations, knowledge of what works, implementation best practice, and “war stories” of how to introduce policy innovations and get them to stick.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has required governments around the world to respond through a variety of policy actions. Government-enforced COVID-19 restrictions intended to protect the health of citizens had the unintended consequence of placing many women and children at higher risk of domestic violence in particular. UN Women drew attention to this situation and labeled VAW the “shadow pandemic.” Here, we have considered how UN Women and policy entrepreneurs in select jurisdictions around the world used the crisis to drive significant policy change to both respond to, and prevent, VAW. We suggest that this is an instance of policy change that has been trajectory altering. Yet, while we might say that COVID-19 presented a policy window to increase government efforts to reduce VAW, those who used the policy window to best effect had been long advocating for policy change. Certainly, the dynamics of the response to VAW are noteworthy. Through studying this case, we have gained new insights into global policy entrepreneurship and norm diffusion. But we have also cautioned those who would suggest that a crisis inevitably creates opportunities for policy change.

COVID-19 opened some policy windows. It also closed off many as well. And even when the policy window opened, not everyone who could have potentially taken advantage of it did so. Advocacy to combat VAW offers powerful insight into the dynamics of contemporary policymaking and the international dimension of norm diffusion processes particularly in the context of a global crisis. Understanding those dynamics can advance our discussion of policy windows. A lot can happen in a remarkably short amount of time. But that change will only occur if advocacy systems are well-established and strategic actors have practiced the drills that support the rapid diffusion of policy knowledge and action.

## Conflict of interest

The authors have disclosed no conflicts of interest.

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