

CARE AND CONNECTION IN CRISIS

FEMINIST STRATEGY TO CONFRONT COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic calls upon us to move quickly to save lives as we manage grief, fear and frustration. It also calls us to leverage what we know about social change and recognize that emergency responses to this crisis are seeding the future right now.

Now is the time to do what the women of MADRE's partner organizations have always done: work to meet critical needs in communities and organize for practices and policies that put the health of people and planet over profit, steer us towards a just transition to sustainable economies, and embrace connection and cooperation as we protect each other and rebuild from disaster.

A Time of Peril and Possibility

This is a watershed moment, one that indelibly changes who we are, individually and collectively. We've faced them before: 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the election of Donald Trump. Each was a domestic manifestation of a global crisis. And each was exploited to deepen inequalities – through endless

war, disaster capitalism and US-style authoritarianism. At the same time, these threats opened new opportunities to advance social justice – through the movement to stop the war on Iraq, the expansion and linking of environmental and racial justice work, and the surge of feminist, pro-democracy organizing in the wake of the 2016 election.

The opportunities for progressive social change at times like this, when history seems to speed up, are fragile. But they are nevertheless opportunities, and there's one before us now. The social, economic and political shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic combine to produce the greatest trigger moment of our lifetime. We all feel it: it's a new day. And even as we're struggling to identify and absorb the implications of the upheaval unfolding around us, we need to grow the opportunities to produce changes for the better.

A social justice response to the pandemic, both in the US and globally, is all the more critical as we brace for the suffering from the ruin of the global economy, the power-grabs and militarized responses by authoritarians, and the efforts of

xenophobes and fundamentalists to impose their reactionary narratives on the crisis.

MADRE is committed to enabling people to recognize and resist these dangers. We do this, first of all, by refusing the false choice between (a) retreating to an individualized “survivalist” mode, or (b) fearfully forfeiting our rights in return for protection from an all-powerful State. Instead, we

forge a third way, one that will generate the alternatives we need. We know from decades of working with grassroots women’s groups facing war and disaster that recovery and well-being will come, not from turning inward or relinquishing our power, but from a collective, rights-based response that prioritizes the needs of those made most vulnerable in crisis.

The Principles That Will Guide Us Now Are the Ones We Live by Always

Interdependence

More than ever, this virus has revealed a profound truth: we are all connected. The spread of COVID-19 – across species, across borders, across identities – drives home our fundamental interconnections and highlights the need for interpersonal and international responses that are cooperative and coordinated.

This truth stands in stark contrast to right-wing views of people as atomized individuals, without relation or responsibility to one another. Seeing the crisis as a zero-sum game, Trump has used it to justify his longed-for border crackdown and stoke divisions. Yet, it’s never been more clear that the well-being of people in Wuhan, Tehran, Caracas and New York is interdependent. The links between deforestation, animals forced into greater proximity with humans, and the spread of the virus offer the same lesson: to destroy the health of the planet is to destroy our own health.

Interdependence in Action: MADRE will push back on ideologies of separation and embrace the power

of connectivity. Serving as the hub of a vibrant global network of local women activists, we will translate and transmit learnings from the emergency responses we support. This is how we ensure that grassroots women’s innovations can be shared, adapted and replicated where they are needed most.

Global Justice

We know that the COVID-19 crisis did not come out of nowhere. Its origins lie in decades of neoliberal attacks on public spending for water, sanitation, housing, and health services, as well as the degradation of ecosystems and animal habitats, global cooperation and human rights. A global justice approach to this crisis must meet immediate needs while avoiding and repairing past harms.

Global Justice in Action: MADRE will provide urgent healthcare and sanitation services and spell out a critical perspective on why that infrastructure is weak or missing, like in Iraq, which is recovering from decades of US bombing campaigns. At the

same time, we will work to hold governments accountable to their obligations to fulfill social and economic rights.

We will amplify our partners' calls for an end to deforestation and the commodification of life-sustaining resources, like water and medicine. We will support their work to confront these threats at the community level and in international policy. We recognize that communities that have been historically marginalized face gaps in accessing lifesaving information as we mobilize to meet that need, through communications in local languages and according to the priorities of trusted community leaders.

Intersectionality

Even as we recognize that this virus connects us all, we know that people are not equally impacted. Those who already face systemic discrimination are further endangered by policy responses that compound inequality, such as attempts to exclude immigrants from urgent COVID-19 related support. We need policies tailored to the needs of all our communities – especially people targeted with discrimination because of their class, gender, race, sexuality, ability, nationality, or other identities.

These same communities have critical knowledge to share about how to confront the pandemic in ways that can strengthen resilience for everyone. For instance, while public health alerts warn us of the disproportionate danger that COVID-19 poses to people with respiratory conditions and other chronic illnesses, we need to uplift the vital knowledge held by people with that lived experience. We must demonstrate what's always been true: disability justice isn't only for disabled people, it's critical to our collective well-being and depends on

recognizing the rights and leadership of people with disabilities.

Intersectionality in Action: As a matter of both justice and strategy, MADRE will support broadly participatory, inclusive and rights-based mobilizations to end the pandemic. Approaches that strengthen democratic norms and processes are critical at a time when authoritarian governments have placed democracy in their crosshairs and are exploiting people's isolation and fear to further consolidate their power.

Care Ethics

This is a moment when we can all let the best parts of ourselves shine. We can take care of ourselves and reach out to people who might need us. We can push for the progressive policies we deserved all along and need so much now: universal health care, child care, paid sick leave, economic and environmental sustainability.

This also means making visible the care work for which women and girls are typically responsible around the world, work that grows exponentially in a time of crisis and puts women and girls at added risk of exposure to the virus.

Care Ethics in Action: MADRE's emergency response will be multi-tiered, not only operating at the community level to provide for prevention and health services, but also launching human rights advocacy and social movement strategies that can seize upon the openings of this moment to secure new progressive policies rooted in an ethic of care.

Women's Local Responses to Global Crisis

MADRE is supporting local women leaders organizing the pandemic response in frontline communities, such as refugee camps and war-torn and water-stressed parts of the world. They are trusted, longtime activists who understand deeply and specifically the needs of their communities and who have made mutual aid a way of life. They are known as reliable sources of support and information, so when they offer public health guidance, people listen. What's more, they are alert to community members who become ill or need additional help, and they can respond immediately.

Yemen

Yemen's health system and fragile water infrastructure have been decimated by years of war and famine, worsened by US support for Saudi air strikes and aid blockages. Now, with this coronavirus spreading, people don't have clean water for drinking, much less for hand washing to prevent infection.

Working with our partners at Food4Humanity, MADRE is supporting access to potable water stations and local efforts to distribute sanitation supplies to communities, including hygiene kits for people who are incarcerated. We're amplifying our partner's call for an immediate ceasefire to enable community organizers and health workers to carry out their urgent work, a demand that has been echoed and asserted globally by the UN Secretary-General.

Nicaragua

In Nicaragua, Indigenous Peoples are denied adequate healthcare services and public health information, and their water sources have been polluted by multinational mining and timber companies. Our partners at Wangki Tangni are meeting the added threat of COVID-19 by fortifying communities with health education, maternal healthcare and food security.

MADRE is supporting our partner's radio station to reach 115 remote communities with actionable information on how to keep safe. We have equipped local midwives with supplies to prevent spikes in maternal and infant mortality as the area's meager hospitals become overburdened by COVID-19. And through a MADRE-supported seed preservation and organic agriculture initiative, our partners are able to ensure that disruptions to food supply chains do not result in widespread hunger.

Democratic Republic of Congo

Just days after the World Health Organization confirmed that the last Ebola patient in the Democratic Republic of Congo had been discharged, they announced the first case of COVID-19. Our partners at SOFEPADI, a network of women activists, were essential to confronting Ebola, and they're ready to put that hard-won wisdom into practice to fight this new danger.

With MADRE's support, SOFEPADI has launched a public awareness campaign that will focus on people at the margins, especially those living in displacement. Our partners are equipping

themselves and their communities with sanitation and medical supplies, like disinfectants and thermometers, and ensuring that people in local refugee camps, schools and other key public spaces are able to access the prevention tools they need.

Furthermore, our local partners, in the DRC and across the globe, are acutely aware of the risk of an explosion of gender violence as tensions and trauma escalate, as people's mobility is constrained and as services for survivors become more difficult to access. SOFEPADI is organizing community violence-prevention campaigns online, including by enlisting men to talk about managing stress and caring for their families.

As we put emergency funding, tools, technology and training into the hands of local women activists, we help boost their credibility and standing as community leaders. By offering flexible funding, including to cover ongoing costs in a time when some of our partners' work may be suspended, we ensure that critical feminist organizing at the local level can outlast this crisis.

MADRE will embody and advance the principles and programs we need now by staying focused on our mission while adapting to the new conditions we face. We already know how to do this. In fact, it's what MADRE has always done. We will work with our partners to protect those who have been left most exposed to the danger. We will help people recognize and resist unjust policies. And we will respond to the crisis in ways that build the world we want to live in.



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