

Free Press Unlimited believes that all people deserve to know, and that everybody should have access to independent and reliable information in all countries, both off and online in order to make informed decisions. Press freedom, independent journalism and open platforms can guarantee that access. Free Press Unlimited supports media and journalists to become independent players in civil society, who constitute a diverse and professional information landscape and function as catalysts for change.



Photo: Riesgo Cruzado / Jorge Astola

COVID-19, **Gender and Media**

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the unprecedented lockdown to protect citizens in almost all countries in the world is enormous. Apart from the economic, political and societal consequences, it exposes and exacerbates all inequalities that existed before and it discriminates more against those who were already marginalized. In previous epidemics like Ebola in West Africa, women suffered greater exposure to the virus,

in large part due to preexisting gender norms in their environment¹. And sadly we see that happening again, but now on a global scale. Nearly 70% of the care and healthcare sector workers fighting at the front line of the pandemic are women. And they are most likely to be (over)exposed to the virus when doing their job and more likely to experience extra negative impacts of COVID-19, which makes it a gendered pandemic requiring specific interventions.

COVID-19 is a threat to democracy². In a large number of countries, where press freedom is already under threat, the measures to curb the pandemic, as well as the financial distress of media organisations has led to a weakening, if not silencing of independent journalism. Free Press Unlimited works with 66 media partners in 31 countries to strengthen independent and gender-sensitive journalism. We see a growing infodemic where unverified information leads to the spread of misleading, false, and misrepresenting news and no access to (public) information weakens the ability to hold governments accountable. In some countries the remaining independent media have taken over the function of the government and are transformed into public health information sources without the (financial) support of that same government.

Media need to **reinvent journalistic methods and focus on crisis mitigation in their organisations.**

Media in many countries (including The Netherlands) are already at the brink of collapse due to mass reduction of advertisement revenues and are no longer able to pay staff or hire freelance journalists³. For the first time since the set-up of the Legal Defense Fund and Reporters Respond fund, Free Press Unlimited saw a significant increase of requests from predominately women journalists. Prior to COVID-19 nearly 70% of applications

were from men, now women journalists account for 70% of applications requesting financial hardships/loss of income support via Reporters Respond⁴.

Women need to be seen and heard. One of the key objectives of the current Gender Equality in the Media (GEM) programme of Free Press Unlimited is to ensure a **balanced and diverse representation of women**. This pandemic also calls for an urgent action to **monitor how gender-sensitive the content on COVID-19 is**. The most recent data, as of February 2020 from Women in Global Health showed that for every three men quoted in media coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak there is only one woman quoted⁵. It is essential to create women experts databases taking into account the diversity of expertise, opinions, and backgrounds of the experts (intersectional approach) that the media use to cover COVID-19. Media must do a better job and reach out to women experts and include their views and perspectives when covering any story.

Media need to reinvent journalistic methods and focus on crisis mitigation in their organisations. The new lockdown realities require redirecting scarce resources to deal with the crisis, new thinking, and addressing the new learning needs. Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), proper infrastructures to ensure teleworking, access to the internet are just some of the urgent needs under COVID-19 media organisations face. Empirically, gender-based violence increases during epidemics. Women journalists are regularly attacked physically and online even in non-crisis settings, and COVID-19 aggravates their situation even further. This necessitates that



resources are made urgently available to address complexity of issues associated with COVID-19 and a need to step-up crisis interventions: for example, purchasing of PPE for journalists, training series that promote online and physical safety of women journalists during the crisis, mental health support, "digital journalism", how to report on COVID-19 safely from the field, online presentations, and digital skills, etc.

Leadership engagement is essential to achieve substantial change. In economic distress leaders need to embark on a change process, developing new (or at least adapted) business models to survive, build a new organisation, and acquire new skills. Engaging leaders, through peer learning networks or mentoring support, is an opportunity to ensure that the support is gendered, in favour of creating success for female leaders in the media.

The ultimate test for leaders often comes in times of crisis. Female leaders across the world got praise for their rapid and efficient management of the COVID-19 response⁶. However, they are still in the minority. The same applies to the leaders in the media: women hold only 27% of the decision-making positions⁷. At the same time, the crisis provides an opportunity to develop a new type of leadership within the media: on the one hand, it can help current leaders develop more gender-transformative business strategies, on the other hand, it can help grow a new type of female leaders that are able to adapt and lead these media organisations through and out of the crisis.

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FPU, directly or through its media development partners seeks to deliver a coherent support package to media to help media navigate this crisis, facilitate necessary changes, and in so doing support women in society and the media. With no effective support mechanisms for the media – a small, but critical sector for the society - we will see a weaker civil society, women's needs being largely ignored in the way the economic crisis is dealt with, and we will see less, not more women journalists and leadership in media.

Free Press Unlimited's COVID-19 response plan

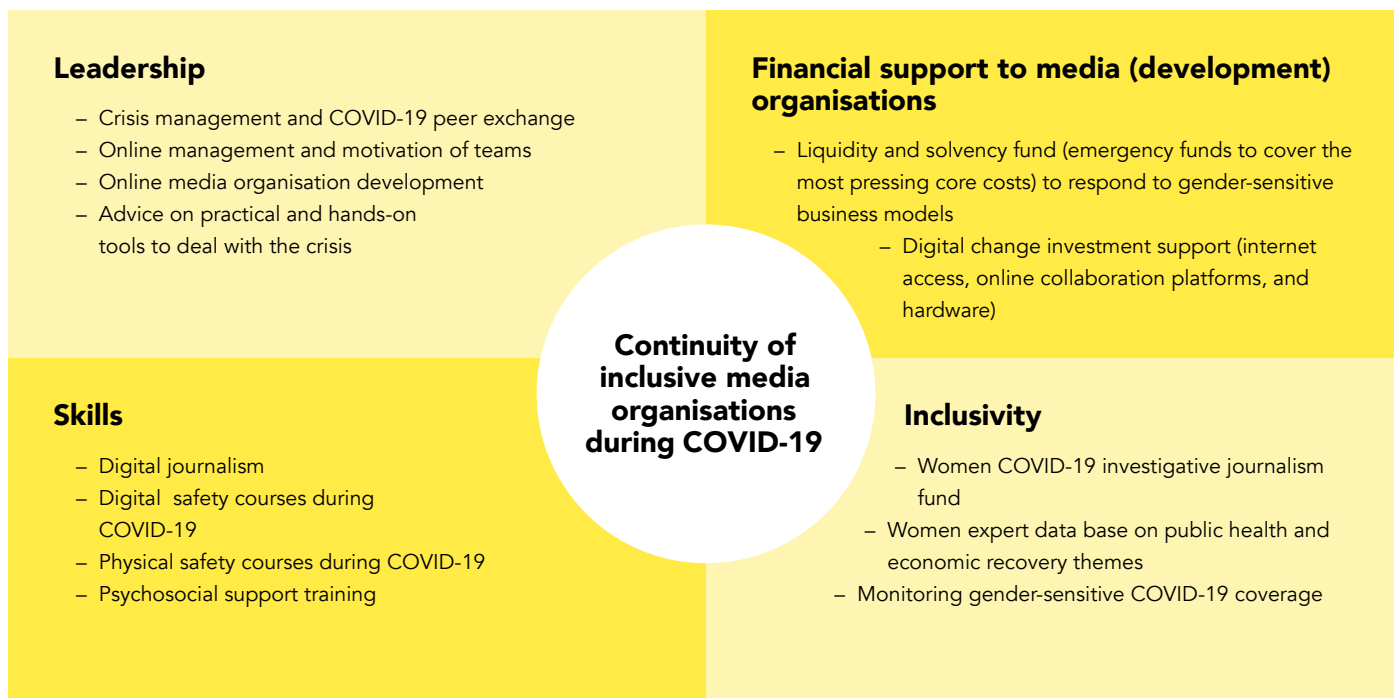
While the GEM (Gender Equality in the Media) programme of Free Press Unlimited, supports a long-term vision, the current pandemic requires swift response to address immediate issues the media organisations face, which, if left unaddressed will put the existence of the independent media in danger and as such the position of women. Media rely heavily on the funding of international donors and in many cases depend on their support entirely.

FPU has a range of tools and instruments in place and can step up this support which is critical now. In addition, we can mobilise adequate support for media in distress, ensuring that media come back better after the crisis and can continue to report, and produce gender-sensitive content in these difficult times.

Specifically, we aim to step-up our support to women

journalists in the production of inclusive gender-sensitive content in all COVID-19 content and broadcasts and ensure equal participation and decision-making by women in the media. The interventions are based on the four domains of the crisis-response plan (Leadership, Financial support, Skills, and Inclusivity) aimed at developing new/advanced skills and at the same time addressing the gender inequality during this crisis.

The four domains of GEM's COVID-19 response plan



We believe that by addressing all four domains, we will be able to tackle the COVID-19 crisis in the short-term and provide a basis for long-term recovery of media organisations.

We expect these additional interventions to be implemented as soon as sufficient funding is available and last between 8 and 12 months.

For information about the COVID-19 response of Gender Equality in the Media programme, please contact:

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