

Hon Jan Tinetti
Minister for Women

Cabinet COVID-19 Ministerial Group – proactive release

**Responding to the Immediate Impacts of COVID-19
Lockdowns on Vulnerable Women**

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Author: Minister for Women

In Confidence

Office of the Minister for Women

Chair, COVID-19 Ministerial Group

Responding to the immediate impacts of COVID-19 lockdowns on vulnerable women

Proposal

- 1 This paper seeks to inform Cabinet of what we learnt about the impacts of the 2020 nationwide COVID-19 lockdown on vulnerable women and makes recommendations on how to best safeguard these women during and in the immediate aftermath of the 2021 nationwide COVID-19 lockdown. This paper recommends Cabinet agree to fund Vote Women \$2 million to re-establish the COVID-19 Community Fund to address the immediate impacts of further lockdowns on vulnerable groups of women and girls.

Relation to government priorities

- 2 The actions proposed in this paper contribute to keeping New Zealanders safe from COVID-19, in particular safeguarding the wellbeing of vulnerable women during, and following periods of lockdown.
- 3 The actions proposed would also support those disproportionately affected by the pandemic and associated alert levels, particularly Wāhine Māori and Pacific women, women who are isolated, and those experiencing family violence or mental health challenges. Because of the inextricable link between the economic wellbeing of mothers and children, the actions in this paper would also help to address child poverty.

Background

- 4 The 2020 nationwide COVID-19 lockdown (March-May 2020) had a disproportionate effect on women and particularly our most vulnerable women in society. The adverse effects included job losses, loss of income, increased unpaid care work, and was an additional barrier to those seeking to leave violent or abusive domestic situations.
- 5 As the Minister for Women, I am committed to ensuring we take rapid and effective action to ensure we are reaching these women during the current lockdown to help safeguard their wellbeing.
- 6 Vulnerable women are typically isolated and have many barriers to accessing government support whether it be through language challenges, fear, and mistrust of government agencies or a lack of knowledge of where to go for help.
- 7 To address the immediate need in the aftermath of the 2020 lockdown, the Government established a \$2 million Fund for community organisations who support women and girls in Aotearoa. The funding was secured as part of the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund (CRRF), administered by the Ministry for Women. Appendix One summarises the outcomes from the Fund.

- 8 Based on our evaluations, the allocation of funding through established community groups and organisations at a grassroots level is a highly effective way to reach vulnerable women.
- 9 While there are other government supports available to vulnerable New Zealanders, including women, through schemes such as the wage subsidy; there are additional needs that won't be met through existing funding. Examples include, lack of access or information on period products, help with leaving an abusing partner, culturally appropriate support networks for migrant women, mental health support for LGBTQ+ women, and a lack of access to basic toiletries, amongst a wide range of social supports provided at grass roots and community level.
- 10 As the Minister for Women, I am recommending Cabinet re-establish the Fund now in order for applications to be received in September 2021.

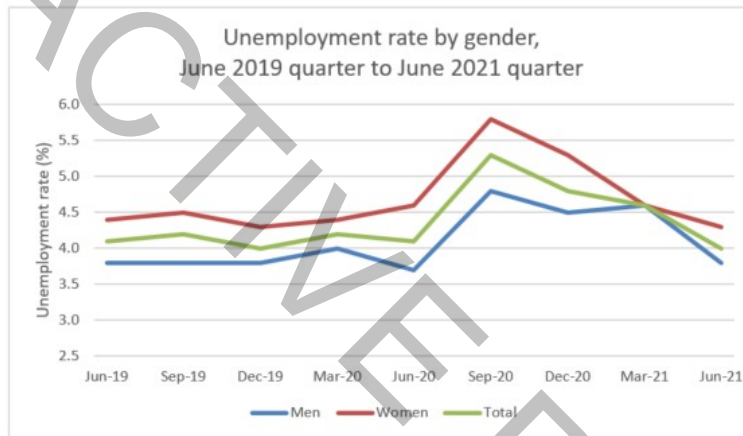
What we know from the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown

- 11 Across New Zealand, much like the rest of the world, the most vulnerable women suffer exacerbated negative impacts immediately due to lockdown – especially those who are victims of family violence or those who are financially struggling.
- 12 Women who we consider vulnerable are those belonging, or perceived to belong, to groups that are in a disadvantaged position or marginalised. The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) identified specific vulnerable groups of women that require further research and consideration in Government policies across the world as being: 1) women with disabilities; 2) ethnic minority women; 3) lesbian and bisexual women, and transgender people; 4) women in detention and in prison; 5) women from rural and remote areas; 6) women engaged in prostitution; 7) women who are victims of family and sexual violence; and 8) women victims of trafficking.
- 13 There is no straight forward measure to assess the safety and wellbeing of these women during lockdown; however, we have a range of evidence from previous lockdowns to support our understanding of the adverse impact lockdown can have on vulnerable women.
- 14 Police reported that during alert level 4 in 2020 there was a drop in the number of reported sexual assaults, likely linked to the ban on social gatherings and interactions outside a person's bubble and therefore reducing the opportunity for external reporting. However, we know that lockdown can increase the risk of violence from a partner or family member and there may be significant challenges for some in seeking help. Reports from women's refuge centres around the country in 2020 indicated they were inundated with women and children seeking safety from an abuser.
- 15 Feedback received by the Human Rights Commission from refuges, sexual violence services, and helplines, reported increases in calls on family violence and sexual violence. In September 2020, victim advocates indicated that there was an increase in domestic violence, and that the brutality of attacks and severity of injuries was significantly worse.
- 16 Women already perform the vast majority of unpaid work, in particular caring and community roles. During lockdown in 2020, women were more likely to report a significant increase in caring demands in addition to ongoing work demands. Carers NZ and the Carers Alliance found that 64% of carers provided more significant care

during COVID-19. A recent Westpac New Zealand report, *Sharing the Load*, confirmed that the division of labour remains gendered in New Zealand households: fathers typically do most of the paid work, while mothers undertake the bulk of the load at home¹. COVID-19 merely exacerbates the inequitable status quo. For many, particularly sole parents (the majority of whom are women) this had a direct impact on their mental wellbeing and increased feelings of isolation and stress.

17 The economic impact of the 2020 lockdown also disproportionately affected women. This was evidenced through a higher rate of unemployment for women compared to men. In the quarters following the onset of COVID-19 (June to December 2020) a gap in unemployment rates between men and women was observed, with women's rate trending 1 percentage point higher than men's. This gap closed in the March 2021 quarter, when men's and women's rates both stood at 4.6 percent.

18 Subsequent reductions in unemployment have benefitted men more than women, and employment rates now stand as they did in December 2019 – with men at 3.8 percent, and women at 4.3 percent.



19 While in the past quarter, the number of main benefit recipients decreased, more men than women have left benefits.² Annually, the number of men on benefits has gone down (2,520 fewer men), while women on benefits have gone up (3,381 more women). The Government's focus on 'shovel ready' infrastructure employment initiatives have tended to heavily favour men, while job creation opportunities for women has been much smaller.

20 The negative economic experiences women face are especially felt by Māori and Pacific women who have historically been more affected in a crisis and for longer periods. It can take three to six years longer for Māori and Pacific unemployment to return to 'baseline' levels, compared to non-Māori unemployment.³ While I have a longer term work plan to address these economic and employment impacts on women (see para 33-34), it is important to note that vulnerable women will not only be continuing to experience economic hardship caused by the 2020 lockdown; they are likely to have this hardship exacerbated by the current lockdown. Access to food, warm and dry housing⁴, and basic needs such as toiletries are likely to be immediate

¹ <https://www.westpac.co.nz/about-us/sustainability-community/our-people-communities/sharing-the-load/>

² The fall of 11,190 main benefit recipients, compared with the last quarter, comprises 7,644 fewer men and 3,651 fewer women.

³ <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/business-and-employment/employment-and-skills/labour-market-reports-data-and-analysis/other-labour-market-reports/maori-labour-market-trends/>

⁴ Women have also found it difficult to find safe and affordable housing. As at November 2020, 22,409 people were on the Public Housing Register (up from 16,309 in

concerns for these women and their families, which are further compounded by the potential of job losses.

- 21 One of the best indicators Ministry of Women has to gauge what vulnerable women are experiencing during lockdown, particularly those that are harder for government agencies to reach, is through grassroots community groups and organisations working directly with women who are vulnerable. The Ministry for Women continues to have strong relationships with organisations who provided support to women during and after the 2020 lockdown. These are typically in the not-for-profit sector, supported predominately through philanthropic donations and staffed by volunteers.

How Ministry for Women responded to the needs of vulnerable women in 2020

- 22 To address immediate community needs in the aftermath of the 2020 lockdown, the Government established a \$1 million Fund for community organisations that support women and girls in Aotearoa, as part of the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund (CRRF), administered by the Ministry for Women. The fund was heavily oversubscribed with nearly 500 applications worth more than \$13 million being received by the Ministry. As a result of the oversubscription, the Ministry applied to double the fund. This request was granted on July 6 2020, taking the total fund to \$2 million.
- 23 The Fund supported 155 organisations. The median grant was \$10,000. Over ten thousand (10,570) women and their families directly benefited from the funded projects. The Community fund provided support to the majority of the groups identified as meeting the definition of being vulnerable (see paragraph 12). In particular, a focus was given to women who experienced family violence, mental health issues, homelessness, pregnancy complications, and isolation.
- 24 Case studies:
- 24.1 WestREAP (Westland) started an ongoing social and educational support group for isolated new or expectant parents in South Westland, including maternity classes and learning for children.
- 24.2 The ChangeMakers Resettlement Forum (Wellington) was able to continue driving lessons for migrant women after being faced with a shortfall in valuable volunteers, which increased their ability to provide greater safety for themselves and their children.
- 24.3 Kete Matauranga Trust (Northland) held restorative taiao wananga to promote and enhance the health and wellbeing of kōtiro and wāhine. Learning traditional tupuna matauranga has empowered the kōtiro to create a greater sense of pride and instilling a greater resilience to deal with COVID-19.
- 24.4 Sleepwell Moepai (Waikato) provided items such as duvets, pyjamas and socks for families experiencing extreme hardship. The organisation experienced much higher demand as well as lower donations as a result of the 2020 lockdown.
- 24.5 Zeal Education Trust (Canterbury) supported Rainbow mentoring groups, allowing many young women to access support speedily.

March 2020), of whom 14,010 were women (63%).

- 24.6 Stopping Violence Dunedin (Otago) facilitated two additional group therapy programmes for women, and extended their creative art programme for youth affected by whānau violence.

Acting quickly gets ahead of the impacts of lockdown

- 25 While work is underway across Government to reach vulnerable people, which women will also benefit, through initiatives such as the wage subsidy; leave support scheme; and short-term absence payments for those in work. There are additional needs that will not be met. For example, some refuges are already reporting a marked increase in family violence, as women are locked down with abusive partners and are struggling to meet the demand.
- 26 As we have seen across New Zealand, and globally, the social and economic effects of the pandemic are ongoing for women, and this outbreak will exacerbate them. Moreover, the community organisations that typically support vulnerable women are already facing increased demand for their services as a result of the current lockdown but without any increase to already stretched funding. In particular, the most recent outbreak of the COVID-19 Delta variant has heavily affected those in Pacific communities in South Auckland.
- 27 Based on what we know from the 2020 lockdown, we can most effectively support women and their whānau by acting quickly to support community organisations. In light of these ongoing effects, the case for supporting organisations that mitigate these effects on women remains the same as in 2020.
- 28 I recommend Cabinet consider re-establish the Fund. Based on our experience from the last lockdown, the Fund is a good option for quickly supporting the most vulnerable groups of women at community and grassroots levels.
- 29 The Fund has a clearly defined assessment process whereby applicants had to demonstrate the funding would have a direct impact on vulnerable women, and were not receiving government funding for the same purposes from elsewhere. The assessment and criteria for applications to the Fund will clearly prioritise on community groups with the most acute and immediate needs. Grants disbursed will reflect the size of the groups that would receive assistance and the particular financial situation and need of the applicant organisations.
- 30 In the current context different lockdown levels across New Zealand, I expect that need for funding may change over time. I would expect that priority grants disbursed from the fund would predominantly focus on South Auckland and vulnerable communities in this area – as they have the most acute and immediate needs right now. Last year, the fund supported 40 groups based in Auckland, with a quarter of the funding (\$0.510 million); however this proportion and volume would likely change given the current 2021 situation.
- 31 The Treasury noted that the Fund process was robust, high quality and done in a timely way. The Fund assessment process included participants from the NGO sector who provided valuable insights from grassroots organisations in addition to government policy perspectives provided by officials. I intend to replicate the same joint assessment process with NGO to ensure there is a strong on-the-ground perspective in the distribution of funding.

- 32 I consider that we can replicate a similar process to the previous fund and would also look to make small administrative adjustments to the process to streamline application, assessment and disbursement processes.
- 33 Following a similar process to the previous fund, I would expect that the Ministry for Women will be ready to allocate funding as quickly as is practicable.

Other work underway to address the longer term impact of COVID-19 on women

- 34 In light of the longer-term social and economic effects COVID-19 has had on women, I brought a paper to Cabinet in April (CAB-21-MIN-0113) discussing actions to enhance women's employment outcomes and economic resilience through the development of a Women's Employment Action Plan, as part of the all-of-Government Employment Strategy.
- 35 The Women's Employment Action Plan is focused on addressing the structural changes needed in the labour market to allow women to achieve their potential. It was also in response and to prevent women's employment being unequally impacted by future economic shocks. This was in recognition of the disproportionately negative economic and social impacts that women faced as a result economic shocks such as COVID-19. This work is ongoing and, I will report back to Cabinet in late October on progress with the Plan and agreement to undertake targeted engagement on priority areas for action.

Next steps

- 36 If Cabinet agrees, I will direct the Ministry for Women to reinstate the COVID-19 Community Fund process and commence disbursement as soon as practicable.

Financial Implications

- 37 This paper has financial implications of \$2 million, as a single year increase to the Vote Women baseline for the 21/22 financial year. Given the small size of Vote Women (approximately \$9.8 million per annum) the Ministry for Women is unable to absorb or reprioritise to fund this initiative.
- 38 This funding will include a small component (\$0.05 million) to fund administrative support in the disbursement of the fund. There are no further financial implications on the Ministry or other agencies and the funding is not ongoing.

Legislative Implications

- 39 There are no legislative implications for this paper.

Impact Analysis

Regulatory Impact Statement

- 40 This paper does not require impact analysis or a Regulatory Impact Statement as there are no legislative implications.

Climate Implications of Policy Assessment

- 41 This paper has no direct climate implications.

Population Implications

42 The proposals will have significant impact for the following population groups:

Population group	How the proposal may affect this group
Māori	Wāhine Māori are twice as likely to suffer from family violence, and have double the rate of underutilisation of European women. The programmes and initiatives that will access the Fund previously have included those that support Wāhine Māori and their whānau. Last lockdown, these organisations experienced an increase in demand for their services.
Women	Women face higher underutilization rates (13.0 per cent compared to 8.3 per cent of men), perform the majority of unpaid work, and caring and community roles, as well as face increased levels of family violence during lockdown. This proposal enables community programmes to access further funding to extend their support services to an increased amount of women.
Disabled people	While statistics vary, it is agreed that disabled women are more likely to experience forms of family or sexual violence, which increases during lockdowns. By funding community services that support disabled people and their whānau and carers, the impact and occurrence of family violence and sexual violence during lockdown can be reduced.
Pacific peoples	Pacific women face higher unemployment rates than all other groups of women, and double the underutilisation rates of European women. They are also more likely than European women to experience family or sexual violence. In the last lockdown, these issues became more prominent. Again, by supporting community organisations that have increased demand for services to this group of people during lockdown, the impacts of these issues could be reduced.
Children	Children are invariably impacted when carers or parents experience economic suffering. They are also often the victims of family violence – 14 percent of children have reported being physically harmed or hit in the last 12 months, and 20 per cent of girls and 9 per cent of boys have been forced to do something sexual or had unwanted sexual touching. Economic suffering and family violence increases during lockdown. Increasing support services will hopefully reduce the increased impact and frequency of related harm to children during lockdown.
Ethnic and migrant communities	Ethnic and migrant communities often experience increased isolation and economic hardship during economic shocks. The 2020 Fund supported a range of organisations that work with various ethnic communities, providing women with culturally appropriate and relevant support.

Human Rights

43 This paper is consistent with the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 and the Human Rights Act 1993.

Consultation

44 The Treasury was consulted. The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet was informed.

Communications

45 The Ministry for Women will develop a communications plan similar to the 2020 COVID-19 Fund predominantly providing information via the Ministry website and through social media. I also intend to issue a press release from my office noting the reestablishment of the fund

Proactive Release

46 The Minister for Women will proactively release this paper in part, or in full, within 30 business days of decisions being confirmed by Cabinet.

Recommendations

47 The Minister for Women recommends that the Committee:

1 **note** that the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown had a disproportionate effect on women and girls. These effects included job losses, loss of income, increased unpaid caring work, and increased family violence. Many women have not yet recovered from that lockdown;

2 **note** that there is concern that, depending on the length of the outbreak, the current increase in alert levels may have similar effects, exacerbating existing inequalities;

3 **note** that one action we took in 2020 to mitigate the effects of the lockdown on women was to establish a \$2 million COVID-19 Community Fund to support community organisations that provide services to women and girls. That fund supported over 10,000 women and their whānau;

4 **agree** to re-establish a \$2 million COVID-19 Community Fund through Vote Women.

5 **note** that the re-established fund will focus on community groups with the most acute and immediate needs, and will be assessed by a joint panel of agency and NGO representation

6 **approve** the following changes to appropriations to give effect to the decision in recommendation 4 above, with a corresponding impact on the operating balance and net core Crown debt:

	\$m - increase/(decrease)				
	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26 & Outyears
Vote Women					
Minister for Women					
Departmental Output Expenses:					

IN CONFIDENCE

Improving the Lives of New Zealand Women (funded by revenue Crown)	2.000	-	-	-	-
Total Operating	2.000	-	-	-	-
Total Capital	-	-	-	-	-

- 7 **agree** that the proposed change to appropriations for 2021/22 above be included in the 2021/22 Supplementary Estimates and that, in the interim, the increases be met from Imprest Supply;
- 8 **agree** that the expenses incurred under recommendation 4 above be charged against the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund (CRRF) established as part of Budget 2020;
- 9 **note** that the Ministry will return any unspent funding to the centre.

Authorised for lodgement



Hon Jan Tinetti
Minister for Wome



COVID-19 Ministerial Group

Minute of Decision

This document contains information for the New Zealand Cabinet. It must be treated in confidence and handled in accordance with any security classification, or other endorsement. The information can only be released, including under the Official Information Act 1982, by persons with the appropriate authority.

Responding to the Immediate Impacts of COVID-19 Lockdowns on Vulnerable Women

Portfolio Women

On 7 September 2021, following discussions with officials and Ministers, the COVID-19 Ministerial Group [CAB-21-MIN-0353]:

- 1 **noted** that:
 - 1.1 the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown had a disproportionate effect on women and girls;
 - 1.2 these effects included job losses, loss of income, increased unpaid caring work, and increased family violence;
 - 1.3 many women have not yet recovered from that lockdown;
- 2 **noted** that there is concern that, depending on the length of the outbreak, the current increase in alert levels may have similar effects, exacerbating existing inequalities;
- 3 **noted** that:
 - 3.1 one action that was taken in 2020 to mitigate the effects of the lockdown on women was to establish a \$2 million COVID-19 Community Fund to support community organisations that provide services to women and girls;
 - 3.2 that Fund supported over 10,000 women and their whānau;
- 4 **agreed** to re-establish a \$2 million COVID-19 Community Fund through Vote Women;
- 5 **noted** that the re-established Fund will focus on community groups with the most acute and immediate needs, and will be assessed by a joint panel of agency and NGO representation;
- 6 **invited** the Minister for Women to report to the Minister of Finance as soon as practicable with information on the specific allocations and outcomes of the Fund, and on agreed monitoring and reporting arrangements;

7 **approved** the following changes to appropriations to give effect to the decision in paragraph 4 above, with a corresponding impact on the operating balance and net core Crown debt:

	\$m - increase/(decrease)				
	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26 & Outyears
Vote Women Minister for Women					
Departmental Output Expenses:					
Improving the Lives of New Zealand Women (funded by revenue Crown)	2.000	-	-	-	-
Total Operating	2.000	-	-	-	-
Total Capital	-	-	-	-	-

8 **agreed** that the change to appropriations for 2021/22 above be included in the 2021/22 Supplementary Estimates and that, in the interim, the increases be met from Imprest Supply;

9 **agreed** that the expenses incurred under paragraph 4 above be charged against the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund (CRRF) established as part of Budget 2020;

10 **noted** that the Ministry for Women will return any unspent funding to the centre.

Janine Harvey
Cabinet Office
