

## Gender advocates call for more inclusive COVID-19 vaccine programs



**1 APRIL 2021, MANILA**—UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund in the Philippines, together with the Philippine Disaster Resilience Foundation’s (PDRF) Project K3 and gender advocacy organizations, called for a more inclusive COVID-19 vaccination program in a recent virtual roundtable discussion which tackled gender equity issues during the vaccine rollout.

The “What’s Gender Got to Do With COVID-19 Vaccine – Helping Local Governments Assure Gender Equity & Inclusion in the Vaccination Roll-out” webinar, which was attended by more than 200 participants from the public and private sector, academe, international bodies, and foreign embassies, served as the first step towards the development of a local government unit (LGU) Toolbox which will contain practical recommendations to help operationalize Gender Equity & Inclusion in local vaccine rollouts.

In her keynote address, Commissioner Karen Dumpit-Gomez of the Commission on Human Rights said that “apart from gender, a truly inclusive vaccination program must take into account ethnicity, age, ability, religion, and other contexts and the

possible vulnerabilities that people experience because of one or more of these factors.”

In her opening remarks, Michelle Lang-Alli, USAID Office of Health Director emphasized that globally, and even here in the Philippines, women comprise the majority of the formal and informal health and social care workers – as doctors, nurses, midwives, traditional birth attendants, and community health workers. Thus, USAID is committed to harnessing the power of women’s energy and leadership to elevate the needs of women and girls, particularly those most at-risk and vulnerable to the secondary effects of COVID-19.

In addition, UNFPA Country Representative Dr. Leila Joudane highlighted three key lessons learned from the Silayan Report, the Gender & Inclusion Assessment of the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic: the existence of so-called “hidden households” of people not included in the government’s response, marginalized groups with no access to the internet, and the urgent need for gender-based violence (GBV) protection services to remain open during the pandemic.

“When Filipino stakeholders put their minds, hearts, and hands on it, they will rise to the occasion and take this matter seriously, because lives depend on it,” Dr. Joudane said.

“This roundtable will hopefully showcase the strategic thinking, hardworking efforts, and principled leadership of women’s rights champions and our allies in centering equity and inclusion in our next steps towards recovery and restoration from this dreadful pandemic,” she added.

The panel of resource persons identified the likely disruption in delivering reproductive health services and maternal mortality and unintended pregnancies will increase during the vaccine rollout during the discussion. To mitigate these risks and other dangers, the panel also recommended policies including creating a masterlist of women in marginalized households, implementing protocols to ensure privacy and informed consent, and mechanisms for monitoring, reporting and addressing complaints, among others.

Sharing his insights on the current GBV issues, PDRF Chief Resilience Officer Guillermo Luz said that there is a need to address GBV and sexual abuse that occur during the response. Moreover, the Philippine Federation of the Deaf President Carolyn Dagani highlighted the need for persons with disabilities (PWD) to have access to essential information about the COVID-19 vaccines, citing the challenges of the language barriers that prevent the PWD community from understanding the available information. She stressed that it is the government’s responsibility to provide interpreters in vaccination centers and to consult with members of the deaf community in order to ensure that all marginalized groups are prioritized.

“The responsibility of identifying and addressing gender inequalities and health inequities lies with all of us,” said World Health Organization Representative to the Philippines Dr. Rabindra Abeyasinghe. “As we respond to the new normal, as we must, we must take the opportunity to drive real change and build a fairer, healthier, new future and to come together for vaccine equity,” he added.

Other partners include the Commission on Human Rights (NGA), the University of the Philippines COVID-19 Task Force (academe), PDRF’s Project K3 with the support of New Zealand Aid, Protection From Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Philippine Task Force, World Health Organization (WHO), SPARK! Philippines, USAID, and the Department of the Health. This webinar was also supported by the embassies of the following countries: France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Sweden, Austria, The Netherlands, and the United States.

PDRF’s Project K3 or Kalinga para sa Kalusugan ng Komunidad will continue to work with the UNFPA and their partners in developing the LGU toolkit, disseminating it initially in 47 LGUs before expanding to the rest of the country through the iADAPT digital learning platform, and championing inclusive communication strategies for the vaccine rollout. UNFPA and Project K3 are developing the materials which are targeted to be deployed in the second quarter of 2021.

To learn more about Project K3, visit <https://iadapt.pdrf.org/k3-briefing/>The recording of the event will be uploaded soon on PDRF’s iADAPT platform where users will also be able to generate a certificate of attendance.