

Government of Pakistan
Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety Division
Press Release

Sania Nishtar joins a ministerial roundtable hosted by UN Women in Bangkok



August 5, 2020: Dr. Sania Nishtar joined a high-level virtual ministerial roundtable with Ministers from around the world as part of the expert panel to jointly share experiences of several countries in ensuring a gender-inclusive response to the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery measures.

The roundtable discussion was hosted by Phumzle Mlambo Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women. The primary goal of the discussion was to foster cross-regional knowledge-exchange and sharing of best practices to realize progress on SDG 5 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic with a specific focus on women’s leadership and participation in the COVID-19 response and gender-inclusive packages. Distinguished panellists also identified opportunities for cross region learning and collaboration.

Dr. Sania Nishtar spoke in the panel on “response and recovery”. She outlined details about Pakistan’s remarkable efforts which have resulted in early disease decline as well as support for poorest families whose lives were adversely affected by COVID 19. She said that 61% of Ehsaas Emergency Cash disbursements were to women. More broadly, she added that Ehsaas is addressing women's priorities through the economic response strategy.

Further, elaborating the women focused agenda of Ehsaas, Dr. Nishtar stated, “Foundational to Ehsaas is the realization that it is critically important to ensure that the program is responsive to needs of women in the country, who comprise 49% of total

population. The ambition of Ehsaas is to skew critical initiatives towards women, by ensuring that at least 50% of all beneficiaries targeted by the program across initiatives are women. Therefore, Ehsaas encompasses several social protection and poverty alleviation initiatives targeted towards women, across a plethora of initiatives including interest free loans (50% women), income program (60% women), undergraduate scholarships (50%), Kafaalat (7 million women). Also, Insaf Card covers health conditions for women, preferentially. In addition, labour force policies are being prepared by Ehsaas Labour Expert Group for women domestic workers, and rural women whose work is seen as an extension of their household responsibilities. Likewise, the second chance program for girls, and conditional cash transfers for primary education of children, 50% of them will also impact welfare of women, thus, opening the doors to rights and opportunities.”

In short, the roundtable virtually combined significant ideas, responses and experiences around the gendered impacts of the pandemic. The panel collectively reiterated that the COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity to address the key challenges to achieving gender equality and build back better in post-COVID times.

Drawing on the experience and useful lessons from Ehsaas Emergency Cash program, Dr. Nishtar said, “Pakistan is the fifth largest country in the world, there are 24 million breadwinners who rely on daily wages or are self-employed in the informal economy and life for them virtually came to a standstill with implementation of a lockdown in March. To respond to this challenge, the Government of Pakistan created the Ehsaas Emergency Cash program, which is the largest social protection program ever in the country’s history. It was rolled-out within 10 days of the lockdown to deliver one-time emergency cash grants. 1.23 billion USD were allocated to support more than 16.9 million families which cover around 109 million people, this is approximately 50% of the country’s population.”

The expert panel brought together Special Assistant to Prime Minister of Pakistan on Social Protection and Poverty Alleviation, the Minister of Social Affairs and Minister of Tourism of the Lebanese Republic, the Minister of Women Affairs and Social Development of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and Director General of the Pension Department of the Ministry of Planning, Finance and Industry of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.