

ON
THE
FRONT
LINES

ON THE FRONTLINES: DEFENDING RIGHTS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

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**United Nations Office of the
High Commissioner for Human Rights,**

East Africa Regional Office,
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Telephone: +251 115 44 35 85

**United Nations Office of the
High Commissioner for Human Rights,**

Regional Office for Southern Africa,
Pretoria, South Africa
Telephone: +27 12 354 8684

FOREWORD

COVID-19 has transformed the world of work. Remote working has become the new normal for most people, with communications largely moving to the digital space. This has had a strong impact on the work of human rights defenders and the way they defend, promote, and protect rights. Similar to other sectors, restrictions on movement, closure of social spaces and other limitations have forced defenders to find alternative ways to mobilize and defend human rights, often using technology and other tools of modern communication.

For many defenders on the African continent, this new way of working has made it possible for them to carry out their critical work. Yet often, virtual sensitization cannot reach the most vulnerable persons and communities, the majority of whom lack access to information and communication technology. The pandemic has also brought into sharp focus digital inequalities between those defenders who have access to the Internet, possess digital skills and hardware, and have the necessary funds to participate in these new modes of working, and those living and working in areas with insufficient coverage, particularly those working at the grassroots and in rural areas. Furthermore, barriers to physical contacts have added to the complexity of trust creation, a critical component of defending. Finally, the very tools of communication also pose new risks, such as exposing defenders to surveillance by state and non-state actors, including hackers. For those working on sensitive information, this exposure is potentially life threatening to them and their families.

These developments have had a particularly strong effect on Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs). COVID-19 has brought into sharp focus gender-based inequalities by, among others, increasing the care burden of women, exacerbating pre-existing barriers to women's access to health – particularly in regards to sexual and reproductive health services - leaving women disproportionately vulnerable to economic shocks, and a marked increase in gender-based violence. In a pandemic that is so gendered in its impact, it is crucial that the diverse voices of all WHRDs working on advancing human rights and gender equality are heard.

With this Booklet, the Office of the United Nations High for Human Rights (OHCHR) aims to provide a platform for WHRDs to document and exchange their experiences in the context of COVID-19 and to build solidarity among them. By collecting stories of WHRDs on the African continent, OHCHR wants to increase visibility of WHRDs' work in the process of the pandemic and create a source of information to inform COVID-19 recovery programming and policy making for WHRDs.

December 2020



**New working
modalities and the
use of technology
during a global
pandemic**

KENYA: A WOMAN AND HER PHONE

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION IN TIMES OF COVID-19

Ruth Mumbi,

Community mobiliser, founder and National Coordinator, Bunge la Wamama, Kenya

My name is Ruth Mumbi. I am a community mobiliser and the founder and current National Coordinator of Bunge la Wamama, (Women's Parliament), a women's chapter of Bunge la Mwananchi (People's Parliament) a movement that conducts strong advocacy and campaigning on issues of social justice and accountability in Kenya.



COVID-19 has brought challenges to human rights protection with violations on the rise. We are unable to meet as regularly, and our small businesses and endeavours have been adversely affected. We have been forced to adjust our interventions and rely heavily on social media. My phone has become one of the most important tools of my work.

I love helping the community. My passion lies in seeking justice for the most vulnerable. Doing my work during this period has made me reflect. Human rights violations are on the rise in informal settlements because of the belief that everyone is fighting COVID-19 so they do not have time to focus on human rights violations. Additionally, the Kenyan economy is suffering and thus frustration is leading to cruelty and inhuman behaviour. There are people who had jobs and or small businesses and now are unable to eke out a living. The dignity that work brings is important to society especially for men. Most formally employed and mainstream professionals have also been forced to slow down. This has been a blessing for us as we now have more people volunteering, such as lawyers working pro bono. As they engage with and gain a new understanding of what we experience, I believe we are building a new army of human rights defenders. However, if we have a proper lockdown like India, I fear that the most vulnerable will suffer as the violations are getting worse. My continuous engagement and push for justice has seen me receive threats on my life using the one medium that is my link to the community I serve and help. My phone.

These threats have been distressing but I have managed to call on different actors to come to my aid. One of the security mechanisms I have employed is to publicise my story so that those who would want to harm me know there are many people watching over me. The networks I have built have been important and crucial. They have opened doors to new horizons and relationships. Asking others for help and trusting them to deliver has been key. Due to the pandemic and stay at home orders, people are on social media more and stories can go viral rapidly.

However, I am learning a lot from my younger comrades about doing different things with my phone. I was recently introduced to a civil society organisation that is working to teach us how to shoot professional videos with our phones, both an important tool for documentation and also a much needed spark to creativity.

I am also remembering to take care of myself, as it is important. I switch off my phone and cherish small things like a nap in the afternoon. In spite of threats to my life, I will continue to fight for those who need the most help.

Aluta continua!!

NIGERIA: JUSTICE WILL NOT WAIT IN THE PANDEMIC

Ibangah Goodness Eseme,

Legal and Communication Officer, Women Aid Collective (WACOL), Nigeria. Programs Manager, Girls-Will.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown made organizations and service providers view the world from a more digital perspective. The cut-off of 'less important sectors' and lack of prioritization of Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) response services exposed victims to great danger.

This gave rise to service providers evaluating some of their existing response channel and services. I was directly involved in the management and activation of the digital transformation phase of WACOL during the COVID-19 lockdown. Working as a trained Communication Officer, I managed the online front of WACOL. I was responsible for developing contents for WACOL social media platform which helped educate people on the need to stay together apart and the proper authorities to report to when their rights are violated.

As envisaged, there was a spike in the number of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) cases. As a front liner, it became difficult for me to reach out to police officers, as they were overwhelmed with the implementation of the lockdown rules. Another huge factor was the inherent culture of victim-blaming and trivialization of VAWG cases by some police officers and government officers. On different occasions, I had to go to the police station to plead with them to effect arrest on suspects or rescue the victims. With strict compliance to existing health guidelines, I participated in protest and marches just to compel the government agencies to look into the rising impunity of VAWG in Nigeria. Sadly, I started showing signs of COVID-19 and had to self-isolate.

During the lockdown, I noticed that as a result of the close monitoring of some of the victims by their abusers it became a problem for them to reach out. These victims could only use social media at hours when their abusers were asleep or out of range. This made communication with the victims slow and, in turn, affected fast proactive responses. In addition, some victims did not have



access to electronic devices, making it impossible for them to take pictures and record important conversations that would have been material to their case and useful to secure convictions. Indeed the COVID-19 pandemic slowed down many sectors, with the justice system being no exception. While I am still working with my colleagues to provide victims with shelter and other support they may need, getting justice from the system seems to be a herculean task at the moment.

My response was considered a first aid action plan for victims, and this made it possible for WACOL to handle more than 200 reported cases of VAWG during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Notably was the case of a 10 year old girl Miss P (not real name) who had sustained grievous bodily harm at the hands of her "Madam". The said madam drilled a nail into her head twice, used hot electric iron all over her body, and administered pepper on her private parts. As a first responder, I was able to get the necessary details from the (third-party) reporter, while I worked with the legal team to ensure the rescue of Miss P. The abuser of Miss P was apprehended and charged in court. Unarguably, our work on the digital sphere created a means for others to watch out for women and girls around them and report any case of suspected violence.

UGANDA: WOMEN, PEACE, SECURITY AND THE PANDEMIC

MEDIATION TO ADDRESS TENSIONS DURING COVID-19

Diana Oroma,

Project Officer, Women's International Peace Centre, Uganda

On the fateful night when our government announced complete lockdown, I went into panic mode imagining I would be stuck in the capital city Kampala, over 360km from my family, for an unknown amount of time.

I managed to board the only bus that travelled that night, setting off just seconds before the closure of the bus park. Working from home, with the children competing for attention, dealing with poor internet networks while also learning new technologies, became a new challenge.

I was also concerned about the wellbeing of our partners, the women peace mediators in Yumbe, Adjumani, and Kotido who are always talking to others, walking around their communities and refugee settlements documenting conflict incidences and meeting with the leaders to report cases and running follow up until they are resolved. I called them and they shared painful experiences of the lockdown. At the family level, women were locked down with their abusers and domestic violence increased. In Kotido, armed cattle raids increased with over 1000 animals stolen. Yumbe and Adjumani near South Sudan had a stricter lockdown with refugees entering through porous borders.

Appreciative of the fact that peace building is a continuous process that should not be suspended, and deeply concerned for the health and safety of our partners, I asked myself,

“We may not have a budget to protect the women from COVID-19 but who are we working for? What would we do if one of them succumbed to it?”



This drove us to develop and implement a COVID-19 response plan. With support from district leaders, we were able to reach out to 160 women peace mediators with soap, sanitary pads, masks, and safety information. We thereafter participated in the COVID-19 response taskforce at district level to ensure women's perspectives were considered in decision-making. Tensions increased as restrictions were enforced and a violent conflict broke out. We were able to mediate an ethnic conflict between the Nuer and Dinka in Maaji III refugee settlement, along with the women peace mediators and district leaders. In Kotido, we had to reduce the size of our meetings with local leaders and peace mediators because a physical gathering was inevitable.

My greatest lessons were that flexibility and adaptability are key in difficult situations and that peace will not wait.

SAHARA / MOROCCO: MY COVID EXPERIENCE

THE LONGER THE PANDEMIC STAYS WITH US, THE MORE WE MUST DIVERSIFY OUR INITIATIVES

Aicha Duihi,

President of the Sahara Observatory "OSPDH,"
Sahara / Morocco

In this exceptional context, caused by COVID-19, which forced many countries to take unprecedented measures to manage the pandemic; and declare that this is a situation of health emergencies. Within our OSPDH observatory, this delicate situation of containment imposed upon us the suspension of activities requiring physical presence, but this could not be a reason to suspend our mission.

This is why we adopted other operating mechanisms through the exploitation of technology. Our first concern was the preventative aspect and we responded by reserving the observatory's website and its social media accounts for pandemic awareness campaigns.

To fulfil its commitment to the region's youth to build their capacity, OSPDH organized distance learning sessions on "Civil Advocacy and Reporting." In the same framework, the Observatory also co-organized a distance training, in partnership with "We Network", a network of women's rights defenders in the MENA region, on "Violence against women in North Africa and the Middle East under the Corona pandemic: risks and prospects for protection". I also had the honour of representing the OSPDH at the NGO Forum on the sidelines of the 66th session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, which took place, for the first time, at a distance. In addition, until now, monitoring continues within the OSPDH to observe that the measures accompanying health emergencies and containment are not a cause of arbitrary or discriminatory restrictions of rights and freedoms.

On a personal level, as a human rights defender, I was convinced from the outset that the state of closure should not be an obstacle



to my moral commitment to my region. I volunteered with a group of young people, to draw attention to the living situation of children, whose lives have been restricted to their screens, and launched an initiative to defend the rights of children, particularly their right to leisure as a basic and educational right. I helped create a program: "Afgarich Sahara" (i.e. the Heroes of the Sahara), a competition aimed mainly at children in the region. The program was meant for them to share their experiences on how they have managed distance learning and time in quarantine, and help contribute to culture, art, and creativity via electronic mediums with the aim of creating an atmosphere of positivity within the homes to unleash their creativity and talents.

After the emergence of outbreaks in the region, in conjunction with containment mitigation measures, we were obliged to carry out awareness campaigns in the field, using sound support, awareness videos, and posters inviting citizens to respect the measures of social distancing. I was also with more than 30 associations, able to meet my commitment to conduct distance training on obtaining consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

In these exceptional circumstances, the struggle continues, requiring even greater vigilance for the protection of rights and freedoms, especially for the most affected communities and for the benefit of the weakest links. Moreover, the more the pandemic insists on remaining with us, the more we are obliged to diversify our initiatives and adapt them to this delicate situation in order to return to our normal rhythm of life in defence of our just causes.

ZIMBABWE: GOING DIGITAL IN A PANDEMIC

EXPERIENCES IN SUPPORTING LGBTI

Communication Officer,

Project Officer, Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) Zimbabwe

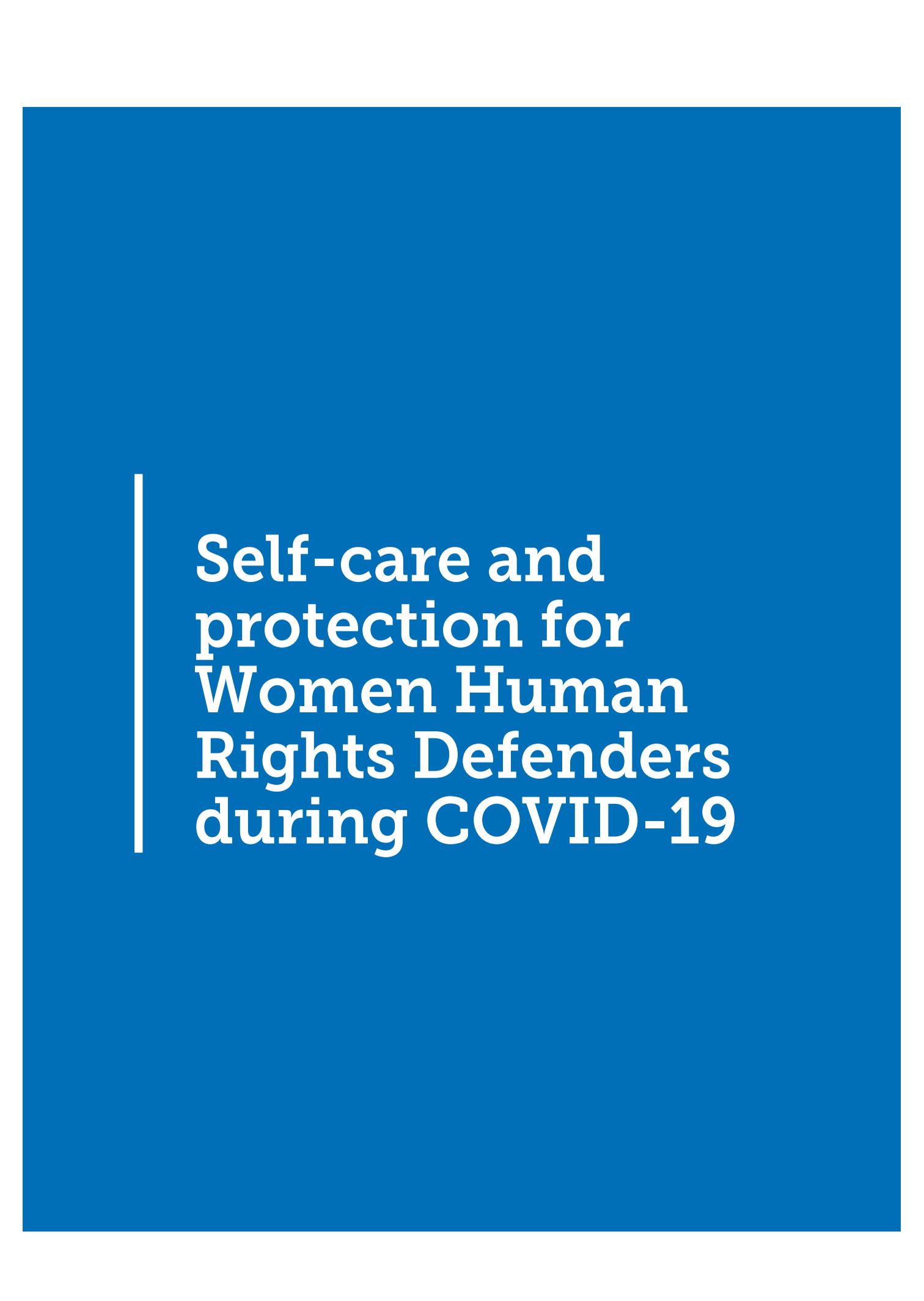
Our work as a membership-based Civil Society Organisation aims to protect, represent, and promote the human rights of LGBTI persons through creating safe spaces, raising awareness, lobbying and empowering communities through supplying of resources, education, and economic capacitation.

My role during this pandemic is to ensure the community served, staff and partners have up-to-date, credible, clear and easy to understand information on COVID-19, as well as updates on what is happening with the organisation and the country in so far as rights are concerned. I manage the website and social media channels, developing and disseminating materials relevant to programming work plans. COVID-19 has meant having to respond rapidly to the changing world; moving to remote work, having to seek funding for the purchase of home Wi-Fi devices and plans, and coordinating organisational communications via mobile, WhatsApp, and email. One example of the effect of this migration was the need to create an online membership form as our forms were previously only hard copies. As communication has moved predominantly online, it becomes easier for blackmailers and cyberbullies to thrive necessitating a greater need for digital security training for Peer Officers and our clients and members. Programmes, which would have been held in person at Drop-in-Centres, have had to become hybrids with a digital component where possible. My work in disseminating information on GALZ's mental health resources has had to increase while also being presented in much easier to understand ways and multilingual formats – a positive thrust for inclusivity in human rights programming especially while violations against LGBTI persons has increased while people are locked down at home. There has however been an increase in online enquiries, especially regarding the increase in STI cases in the community. A response to this has been the set-up of a basic healthcare clinic that offers primary care, SRHR care, and counselling. Raising awareness about this clinic, including the COVID-19 precautions that are taken at the clinic has become a weekly task I have undertaken.

COVID-19 has put greater demands on institutions to provide tangible assistance especially to those whose livelihoods have been affected by successive lockdowns. GALZ implemented a Relief Package programme for members that was publicised on social media – however, due to security concerns pictures for evidence may not be shared. Whereas prior to COVID-19 individuals were free to come to resource centres to access information and could spend full days accessing the library or having discussions, there has had to be a redirection of ideas to providing value through predominantly electronic needs. Media Monitoring has also become difficult as there is a huge cache of fake and false information that one has to sift through, but press is either being delivered only to the office or is stalled altogether.

COVID-19 has forced us to have some hard discussions on how to innovatively reach everyone where some people may not be digitally literate or have the devices, data, and Wi-Fi resources to stay informed.





**Self-care and
protection for
Women Human
Rights Defenders
during COVID-19**

EGYPT: RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF FIRST RESPONDERS

LESSONS LEARNED FROM CAIRO

Entisar Elsaheed,

Founder and the Head, Cairo Foundation for Development and Law, Egypt

During the crisis of COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges facing women became more difficult. At the family level, the majority of women are playing a new added role as a family doctor who must monitor the health conditions of family members, work to improve it, provide services, measures to protect them from infection, as well as providing medical care for the infected family members and intensifying the care provided to the elderly.



Women practically have become the first responders directly responsible for protecting family members, and the ones who bear responsibility for whether or not they will get infected. This role has become one of the most important challenges that women face, especially those who belong to lower social, economic, and cultural classes. This situation is doubled by the financial needs of the families, and women are the ones responsible for fulfilling these needs, especially in light of the precautionary measures followed by the state, which negatively affected the most vulnerable social groups during the economic closure.

Women also faced another challenge; increasingly high rates of domestic violence by males who became more present inside the houses due to the closure. The situation resulted in more burdens on women and, at many times, raised their working hours inside the home to exceed more than 15 working hours simply in order for women to meet the needs of the family.

Males have also suffered psychological pressures as a result of low-income rates and depression caused by social distancing. Staying at homes for long periods made men displace violence to the weaker circles in the house; thus, they increasingly committed violent crimes at rates higher than the normal situations.

Sexual relationships also suffered tensions because of the precautionary measures taken to protect against spread of the virus. This was a very revealing result as it reflected how the absence of sexual education for both genders impaired their ability to access correct and safe sexual information.

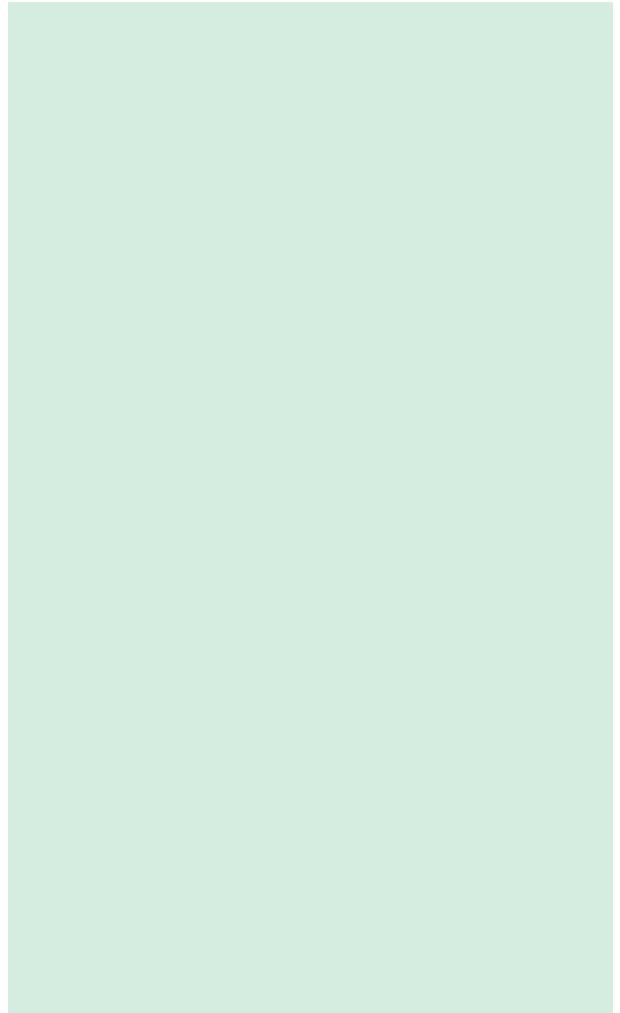
Between losing their jobs and lowering their income rates, many women have experienced severe economic crises, especially true in the case of irregular workers. They also suffered more marginalization practiced against them by the concerned authorities and the media. The crisis resulted in a severe shortage of financial aid and lack of information, measures, and supplies necessary to prevent infection.

From the beginning of the pandemic of the new coronavirus, "COVID-19," and the state's announcement precautionary measures taken to protect citizens from the spread of the epidemic, we in the Cairo Foundation for Development and Law started to think on different levels. First, how can workers in the organization be protected, and what can we do towards preservation of their lives? What measures require physical distancing, taking into account their commitments towards their families, their job responsibilities, and the continued activities of the foundation. Second, how can we take measures that are fundamentally flexible in line with these exceptional circumstances, by adding new activities that suit these

exceptional times, or postponing activities without disturbing the strategic goals of the institution,

After a group discussion with foundation employees, we reached the decision of the need to follow up on all the precautionary measures announced by the state and the impact of these measures on women, especially the marginalized, poor, and irregular workers, migrant workers, and other groups most affected by these measures. Further, that we needed to study the experiences of countries similar to us on economic, social, and political levels, especially countries in Africa and the Middle East. There is great and rich experience of other African countries in this matter.

We thought also about how best to communicate with women, whether at the level of precautionary measures and "social" physical distancing, or at the level of capacity deficit suffered by most of them in dealing with and using modern technology. Cairo Foundation for Development and Law dedicated a hotline to provide psychological support and advice to women survivors of violence. We also wrote research papers on economic and social conditions of women during the pandemic. The foundation produced awareness-raising papers to prevent infection with the coronavirus, using Egyptian colloquial language as well as holding online group meetings for psychological support using the Zoom application.



KENYA: DEFENDING THE DEFENDERS

CHALLENGES OF RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN TIMES OF COVID-19

Salome Nduta,

Director of Programs, Defenders Coalition, Kenya

Salome Nduta is the Director of Programs at the Defenders Coalition, a national organization established in 2007 and incorporated in the Republic of Kenya as a Trust.

The Defenders Coalition works primarily for the protection of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in Kenya. Among others, the Defenders Coalition strengthens capacities of HRDs to work more effectively, besides advocating for favourable legal, policy and institutional environments in order to reduce their vulnerability to the risk of persecution and or harm and to reduce their vulnerability to the risk of persecution.

My day-to-day life involves working with human rights defenders at risk, which includes receiving cases of risks they are facing, assessing the level of threats, and advising on suitable interventions that need to be put in place to assist the HRDs. This work can be summed up in two words - **Case Management**. While my work entails working with all HRDs, I have over time developed a keen interest in working with Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) who face unique challenges in their work, such as sexual harassment, patriarchal social structures, accusations of attempting to subvert traditional customs and social norms which often puts them at odds with community structures of power and threats of violence, especially in urban slums and rural areas of Kenya.

When the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Kenya, it came as a shock because as a first responder I was handling a case of a WHRD in exile who needed to relocate. This was the most difficult moment of my work life as a responder because any slight delay could have resulted in her being in lockdown and would have opened up more threats to the woman and her children. Travelling by road for two days ensured that the woman and her children got home safely,

minus their luggage that I had to send later after lockdown because on reaching Nairobi, the government closed travelling out of and into Nairobi.

Apart from that case of transferring the WHRD, responding to cases during the pandemic has come with its own challenges; verification of cases has not been easy because it means you have to rely on other HRDs whom you have to call, facilitate them with transport and airtime to undertake the assessments and report back. Case intake has to be done online and this is dependent on a number of factors, key among them internet connectivity which is not readily accessible/reliable in most parts of Kenya and costly especially in rural areas. Despite this challenge, having strong networks at the county level and the capacity building that has been done over time, has made my work on case management bearable during this time of the pandemic.

I therefore re-dedicate my time post COVID-19 to strengthen more networks including strong networks for WHRDs that will focus on developing sustainable interventions to HRD work with a focus on economic empowerment, documenting and packaging stories of WHRDs, wellness, mentorship, and capacity development for WHRDs.



KENYA: CHANGING WORKING MODALITIES AND TIME FOR REFLECTIONS

THE NEW NORMAL

Ivy Kihara,

Human rights lawyer, human rights and security management consultant, Kenya

I am a human rights lawyer, based in Nairobi Kenya, working as a human rights and security management consultant.



My COVID-19 experience began in India with a lockdown and cancellation of all flights. It happened 9 days before me and my family members, who were undergoing medical treatment, were supposed to travel home after a rollercoaster medical journey. I was stressed because I was supposed to come home and negotiate to work with SRHR defenders on their security management. Before we were evacuated a month later, I realised I was lucky to be Kenyan. At least in Kenya the censorship is not as bad as it is in India. Any criticism on the Indian government's handling of the COVID situations saw the story, even on major international news channels, cut short. We would sometimes lose the TV signal for a whole day.

Fast forward to post quarantine in Nairobi. I am not formally working yet. I can't have in person trainings with HRDs. Security management work is quite intense and in-person meetings and contact yield great results. One is also able to gauge if the training is re-traumatising participants. I'm not sure how that would work over Zoom.

I also sit on the Board of Directors for various human rights organisations and am still connected to the human rights sphere. While I look for income, I have decided to help out where I can. I was part of a panel discussion on International Albinism Awareness Day and made a video on the theme of the year. People with albinism have really suffered during the pandemic. They cannot meet their daily needs and Positive Exposure Kenya where I serve on the Board, has been distributing care packages to those most affected. The aim of the panel discussion with other organisations was to

give hope to the albinism community and discuss the challenges and plans during COVID to bolster confidence that the community was not alone during the pandemic. We are sadly dealing with bread and butter issues due to COVID and this will continue for some time. I sat with two WHRDs to write their stories on the work they are doing during COVID. We also discussed some strategies for their work - the legal aspects and what they could ask their lawyer and other organisations to do to support them. I am also connecting different human rights defenders to resources and other organisations to enhance their work. I am serving as a sounding board and brainstorming with former colleagues and friends overwhelmed by the COVID crisis. Mental health is important during this time and we have drawn strength from each other.

Am I in the forefront? I'm not sure. I am supporting frontline defenders in a personal capacity as opposed to organisationally. It is important for them to have support. I also feel that I am contributing to the movement. Apart from the various webinars I attend for continuous learning, I guess this is a time of reflection for me. We don't make enough time for that in our frontline work. We should. I am not sure when I will get my next paying job or will freak out due to my dwindling finances, but I am at peace.

I pray, I help, and I read. I walk to loud music and watch Netflix. It's the new normal.

UGANDA: IN THE MIDDLE OF DIFFICULTY LIES OPPORTUNITY?

THE SITUATION OF WHRDS AND CHANCES TO ADVANCE WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS DURING COVID-19

Brenda Kugonza,

Executive Director, Uganda Women Human Rights Defenders Network, Uganda

The COVID-19 pandemic has created discomfort- and made it difficult for WHRDs to take care of themselves in this crisis. Some WHRDs have left their activism work to prevent and respond to Gender Based Violence because they cannot handle the pressure of the work.

During this time, WHRDs continued to denounce human rights violations, support survivors of sexual and domestic violence in the context of the health emergency. However, lockdown measures have made this working environment even more difficult and has contributed to the deterioration of living and working conditions of WHRDs. For instance:

Restrictions to conduct human rights work

- In Uganda, many WHRDs have had to limit, restrict, or suspend planned activities and so they are unable to continue denouncing human rights violations.
- WHRDs have made significant efforts to work virtually and remotely from home, but with limited internet access and other communication tools from inappropriate spaces as well as managing high workloads in the home. However, WHRDs have raised concerns that community work is being affected.
- Social movements and organizations that can contribute alternatives to the crisis that respect human rights have been excluded from processes to create and implement responses to the pandemic. As in other moments of crisis, women's rights are being side-lined, limiting even more the work of women and feminist organizations in the region.

- Lack of access to health services and restricted access to medicine, has affected WHRDs and family members in their care who have pre-existing conditions that require permanent care and medicine.
- Confinement, the lack of income, the care and/or support of defendants, and the school closings have increased WHRDs' burden of care work.

Impacts on WHRDs emotional and psychosocial wellbeing. These include:

- Fear, anxiety, and even depression due to uncertainty and the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on WHRDs themselves, their families, communities and organizational processes.
- Increased stress and emotional exhaustion because of working conditions: Virtual work, longer working hours; working in small spaces that are shared and lacking in communications infrastructures; increased workload in the home.
- Distress and tension caused by confinement itself has impacted lives of WHRDs, their inability to meet, to hug leaving them feeling isolated.
- Hopelessness and unease with the current situation.

Despite the difficult context of COVID-19, WHRDs, their organizations and communities continued to organize themselves to confront the crisis and support vulnerable people, distributing food and basic services, assisting victims of domestic violence, accompanying women defenders at risk, and denouncing human rights violations.

Given the above working environment, many WHRDs have not paid attention to their emotional and physical well-being, neglecting emotional and physical problems and overworking, developing bad eating habits, and increased stress levels. This situation could potentially result in frequent infections of the respiratory tract, headaches, migraines, compromising their immune system and thus increasing vulnerability to contaminating the Corona Virus.

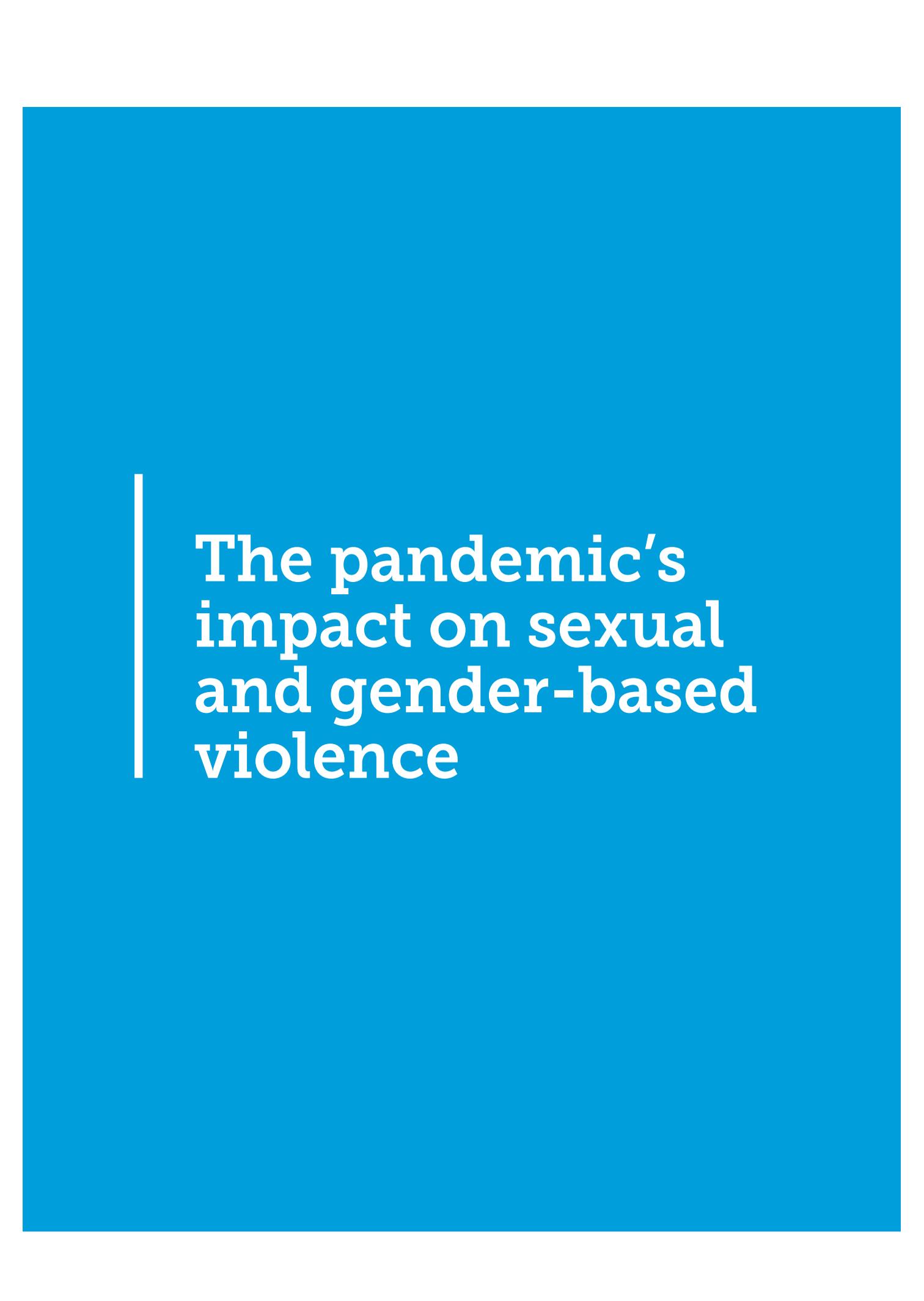
What makes this situation an opportunity for advancing women's rights and gender equality agenda?

- Women Human Rights Defenders work to defend women's rights and gender equality. WHRDs work on a variety of issues including fighting Female Genital Mutilation, Gender Based Violence, and Women's land rights, among others.
- Patriarchy and inequality flourish by breaking down self-esteem and encouraging internal divisions within feminist movements. We must take into account conditions of patriarchal oppression, which blame women for "not taking care of themselves. Self-care is vital to prevent burnout and maintain momentum.
- The situation of promoting self-care, well-being, collective care and healing for WHRDs is an opportunity to ensure sustainability of movements to create gender equality, challenge patriarchal structures, including working on violence, discrimination, and inequality in both the private and public arena. Mutual care between activists is needed to sustain their lives and long-term work for change.

The impact of the health crisis on the lives and struggles of WHRDs was unanticipated; neither were the restrictions on WHRDs hindering them in conducting their human rights defense work. Most worrying is a trend showing that the health emergency is being used to strengthen state of militarization, repression of social protests and Violence Against Women.

The pandemic has become a perfect excuse to continue weakening democracy in Uganda.





**The pandemic's
impact on sexual
and gender-based
violence**

GHANA: THE STORY OF EVE

CRITICAL OBSERVATION TO MITIGATE SEXUAL AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Ayo Ayoola-Amale,

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
(WILPF), Ghana



Ghana is currently among one of the countries with the highest number of confirmed cases of coronavirus in the West and Central Africa region. The pandemic lockdown and social distancing directives has made it more difficult for domestic violence victims in Ghana because people are confined to their homes and as a result locked down with their abusers.

The needle that broke the camel's back was when the police told her

"There is no evidence and I'm not getting anything from your medical report and I must prove it beyond any reasonable doubt"

"Your husband owns you and your body, why are you complaining?"

"You must be a very disrespectful and stubborn wife".

Access to justice for these victims in Ghana, even before COVID-19 was a huge challenge. Considering this, the WILPF Ghana Stop Violence against Women and Girls campaign executed projects in the communities in Greater Accra, Central and Eastern Regions of Ghana on awareness creation; raising awareness on prevention, contact information if infected or abused, providing a helpline for victims of sexual and domestic violence, and publicizing an emergency short code. To the victims, these announcements served as a message highlighting the urgency and gravity of their situation for which reason they needed to file reports while the perpetrators (potential) were put on notice about the reporting system in place, in the hope that may serve as a deterrence to some.

During this time, we came across several abused women that we supported. Our experience with Eve (a pseudonym to protect her identity) during this time was very disturbing because her abusive spouse did not allow her to hold a job outside of the home or leave the house unsupervised even before COVID-19 pandemic happened.

Eve was, like most victims, more willing to disclose her assault experiences to us rather than reporting them to the police.

Based on her experience; she is unlikely to receive reassuring feedback if she reports to the police and that the police officials' attitudes and the clichéd beliefs that Ghanaians in general hold regarding rape and victims of rape even discourages her from reporting. We gave her the helpline and the emergency short code to serve as a message highlighting the urgency and gravity of her situation for which reason she needs to report. Follow-ups were made to ensure she reported and was moved to another shelter.

We believe there are a million abused women and children out there like Eve who have suffered secondary victimization, being blamed and shamed, at the hands of the police. While without optional shelter, they are compelled to endure such abuse. Moving forward, COVID-19 recovery programmes in Ghana should capture this gender-based need. Providing shelter for victims of sexual and domestic violence is crucial in the dispensation of justice.

KENYA: TO SERVE AND TO PROTECT

STAYING SAFE DURING COVID-19

Beatrice Karore,

Community mobiliser and founder, Wanawake Mashinani Initiative, Kenya

My name is Beatrice Karore and I am from the informal settlement known as Mathare. I am a community mobiliser and founder of Wanawake Mashinani (grassroots women) Initiative based in Nairobi, Kenya. I work with women and girls, and pre-COVID-19 was a victim of police brutality.

In May 2020, I was called upon to assist an illegally evicted community in Kariobangi. Most of the evictees were women, children, the elderly, and unemployed and struggling youth. They needed food, shelter, and clothing. Evictions in Kenya are brutal. They leave the people clutching at straws as everything is destroyed. I saw humanity come to the aid of people they did not know in providing for the families. I also saw greed in landlords who saw opportunities for exploitation. I met people who came to provide support to us frontline WHRDs. A shoulder to cry on and lean on is important for the wellbeing of people in the frontline. The pandemic does bring out the best and worst in people but it also made me realise if everyone does a little good in their sphere of influence, the results can be massive.

I work with other women. We support each other and work together. This is important. However, there are risks that come with it. When one member is threatened, we are all at risk. I received a summons to a police station without being told why. I consulted my network and was strongly advised not to go alone. I met with two lawyers – one from the Kenya Human Rights Commission and one from the Law Society of Kenya - and we went to the station on an alternate day to the one on which I had been summoned. The meeting was fraught with underlying threats, with at one point one of the lawyers being separated from us and accused of interfering with police business. Fortunately, we had taken precautions and had a whole team waiting to hear back from us. Once things went south, the Executive Director of Kenya Human Rights Commission was dispatched and was at the police station in the promised ten minutes. The tide changed and the new narrative was that they had

formed a committee to investigate threats to my sister in arms Ruth Mumbi and they only wanted my statement. Patriarchy at its finest! What was funniest in its own dark way was that the officer in charge of the station remembered teargassing the Executive Director. Lesson learned; an adversary at one point can be an ally at another.

I also help women who have been raped, experienced domestic violence, and girls who have been defiled. During COVID such cases have increased. I work with them in receiving medical treatment and reporting. Very many opt to only get treatment and not file reports. As there aren't enough shelters, these women and girls have to go back to unsafe spaces. This is difficult and heart-breaking. Through working with these women, I have encountered a forgotten group, HIV +women who need a balanced diet to maintain their CD4 count. Our group is feeding them and helping keep their spirits up but still, some of them are sinking into depression. It is a difficult time for them and the other women and girls with whom we work. This was not something we dealt with before COVID. Mental health is important and there is need for more help as it will only get worse with continued isolation, limited human contact, and dwindling economies. COVID-19 has brought challenges to human rights protection with violations on the rise. Nevertheless, I continue to do the best I can do to educate, mobilise, elevate, and give dignity to other women.

Viva!



NIGERIA: THE EPIDEMIC WITHIN THE PANDEMIC

PROVIDING ASSISTANCE TO SURVIVORS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE



Professor Joy Ngozi Ezeilo,

Founder, Women Aid Collective (WACOL), Tamar Sexual Assault Referral Centre (Tamar SARC) and Girls-Will, Nigeria. Former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, 2019 National Human Rights Defender Award winner in Nigeria and the Dean Emeritus, Faculty of Law, University of Nigeria.

With my more than two decades experience working as a Women Human Right Defender (WHRD), I foresaw a rise in cases of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown, one I stated to be an epidemic within a pandemic.

From April - June 2020 during the Lockdown, WACOL received and responded to a total number of 226 reported cases of violence against women and girls. Some of these cases included domestic violence, spousal battery, threats to life, rape and defilement, abandonment and forceful ejection. This is simply due to the unfortunate fact that lockdown meant a lot of women and girls found themselves trapped with their abusers; worse still, women rights service providers are not counted as essential workers in Nigeria. The pandemic made it even more difficult for victims to have access to essential needed services. Victims found it difficult to get to the hospital when injured for medical care or worse still, they feared contacting the COVID-19 virus. Overwhelmed by implementation of the lockdown policies, the police did not see victim protection as much of a priority.

All these necessitated the employment of digital contact in provision of our services to clients. I began by making available hotlines for every state in the country. I ensured the creation of a live chat on the WACOL website; this allowed our clients to speak

directly with counsellors. Using our social media platform, we began running an online legal literacy series to educate people on VAWG and COVID-19. I worked with and established partnerships with Action Aid Nigeria, Global Affairs Canada, UNDP Spotlight Initiative and the National Human Rights Commission.

These partnerships helped me to maintain great referral mechanisms online to assist victims get the proper professional care they require. I spoke at radio and television programs about VAWG and the COVID-19. We aired jingles in three different languages to reach out to the diverse Nigerian audience. I also facilitated webinars with key stakeholders in the field of women's right to discuss the rising cases of VAWG, the challenges and way forward for service providers. On occasions where physical consultation was necessary, wearing my PPE and observing social distancing recommendations, I would make field and home visits, distributing relief materials, ranging from sanitizers to foodstuff for families in different communities in Enugu state.

Worthy of mention perhaps is the case of a 24-year-old girl, Miss E (not real name) who reported to WACOL at the beginning of the lockdown that her father, a prominent pastor in Ogun state, had been raping her since she turned 18 years old and that she was also physically and verbally abused by her father. The alleged perpetrator got Miss E pregnant three times and forcefully procured abortions for her. She almost lost her life as a result of this and suffered a series of recurrent vaginal infections. She fled her house for help and I immediately got her shelter in Lagos state, while I worked with sister NGOs to ensure the arrest of her father. Arrested on the 7th day of June 2020, the perpetrator is now in police custody awaiting charges in court.

Post COVID-19 lockdown, WACOL has been able to receive more than 600 cases of VAWG and has effectively responded to over 300 of these cases, while we are still working with the relevant authorities to ensure justice for all.

NIGERIA: WRAPPING WORDS AROUND SHAME

TELLING THE STORY OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Adebola Salako-Kupoluyi,

Senior Manager Finance Operations, American Tower Corporation, Nigeria

“Shame hates it when we reach out and tell our story. It hates having words wrapped around it – it can’t survive being shared. Shame loves secrecy. When we bury our story, the shame metastasizes.” Brene Brown

The above quote introduces the back cover of Adebola’s recently launched book called FREE. As a 6-year-old battling chronic asthma, she grew up in a home where her caregiver constantly sexually molested her, but she dared not speak up because of fear. This was her life for years, but she knew it could be better and she also knew she did not want anyone else to go through this ordeal. So, when the inspiration eventually came from God to write this book in October 2019 (released May 2020), she thought she knew the importance but she really didn’t understand the urgency. However, upon release the need was obvious because one of the fallouts of the lockdown is the persistent increase in cases of sexual molestation. FREE is a book that exposes sexual molestation in children, its effects, and provides a guide to healing through transformational tools. The essence is to bring change to the next generation by daring to shine a bright light where others fear to go due to our African culture and fear of stigmatization. It is a nonfiction book that reveals how Adebola, and five other women, were sexually abused when they were children and most importantly highlights precautions that could be taken to avoid sexual abuse in children and emphasizes the importance of parenting.

In addition, in her capacity as Country Ambassador to Rise & Lead Women, here in Nigeria, she worked with the team to organize two virtual webinars focusing on salient topics addressing the uncertainties COVID-19 posed. The outcome of the webinar is that the over 120 women were armed with strategies they could deploy in their workplace and business to enable them pivot during the pandemic. She also facilitated the empowerment of thirty-six women from low-income communities across 22 states of Nigeria

from a total of 152 applicants. An independent committee reviewed their submission and funds were disbursed. Some of them used the funds to start petty trading around where they lived, hence enabling them to care for their families despite the pandemic.

Testimonials from the projects have been humbling and this has given her the opportunity to reflect on what matters most in life. Adebola says she still get messages from the women that received seed funding; sending pictures of how their business is gradually expanding and how they can fend for their loved ones. She has also had various sexual molestation victims reach out to her after the launch of the book, narrating their ordeals and seeking closure. Consequently, beyond the book distribution Adebola has also partnered with two NGOs; namely Cece Yara Foundation and Mantle of Mordecai (MOM) foundation to provide professional counselling, treatment and ongoing support to children who are victims of sexual abuse.



NIGERIA: RISE IN SEXUAL AND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

BLIND SPOTS IN THE RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

Bose Ironsi,

Executive Director, Women's Rights and Health Project (WRAHP), Nigeria



"My husband is beating me, I can't run outside, if I do, the Police will catch me. If I run to my neighbours, they can't help because they have talked and talked with no changes"

How about your friends?

"They live far away"

How about your relative?

"They live far away"

How about the Police?

They can't help me, because they do not want to get infected with the COVID-19 virus, and so they send me back home to my abuser. Now my Husband says he will kill me!"

It was this state of helplessness that motivated me to leave the safety of my home and seek a government "pass" to be able to move around to help female survivors during this period of COVID-19. I had to look for a pass to be able to support survivors and to forestall harassment from security agencies. That experience also further reinforced my realization that women's issues and rights were not considered essential services. In fact, it was as a result of the agitation by women's rights activists and organization that an ad-hoc provision was even made.

That experience further reinforced my realization that women's issues and rights were not considered essential services. In fact, it was as a result of agitation by women's rights activists and organizations that an ad-hoc provision was even made.

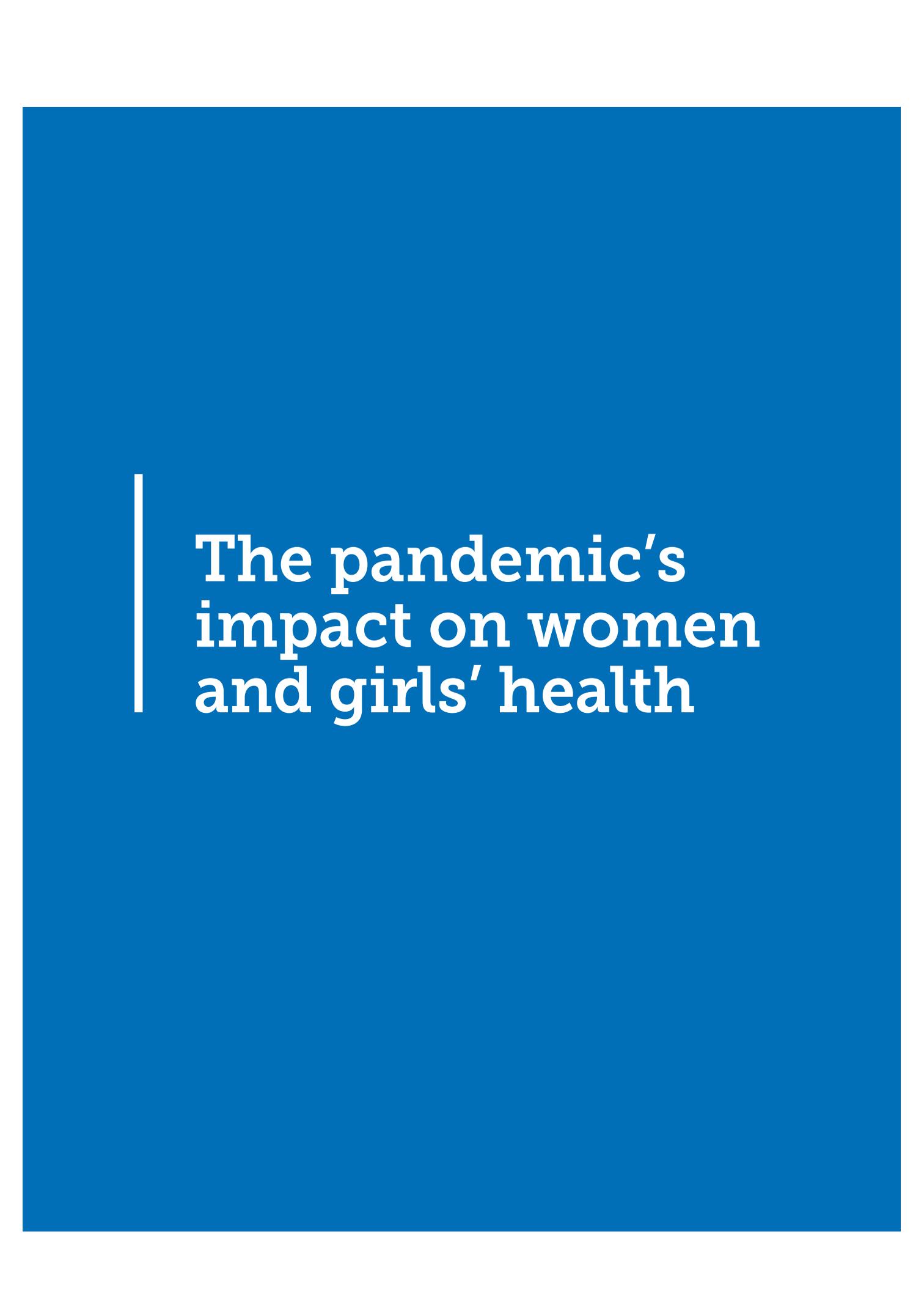
Prior to the lockdowns, if a woman was being battered by her husband and her life was threatened, I'd have gone to rescue her and get her to a shelter. Because of the lockdown and the pandemic, shelters were shut down and even the police were careful about

whom to bring into the police stations; even when arrest of a perpetrator was effected, the police were not keeping them in the prisons out of a fear of an increase in COVID-19 infections, and so they would return home to continue to inflict harm on survivors.

For their part, the survivors had no place to go, relatives were not accepting any visitors for fear of infection, and so it was a full lockdown psychologically, physically, and emotionally. These experiences and realities influenced and shaped my response to SGBV during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria on February 27, 2020, Women's Rights and Health Project has been at the forefront of sustaining the enjoyment of human rights by women and young girls in Lagos State despite COVID-19. We did this by harnessing available digital communication channels to sustain two critical components of women's human rights programming, namely access to justice, and data generation on the impact of COVID-19 on women.

Our use of digital communication channels during this period was two-pronged, namely reporting, and awareness raising on the available laws (stimulating uptake and promoting deterrence). Within this same period, WRAHP commenced research documenting the linkages between COVID-19 and SGBV, and the level of SGBV within the context of the social lockdown in Lagos State. The research recruited 10 enumerators to reach out to 374 respondents. We found that the pandemic and the measures instituted for its control enabled perpetrators to increase violations, with little or no protection from state justice institutions. It revealed to us a blind spot in human rights programming during the pandemic.



**The pandemic's
impact on women
and girls' health**

KENYA: UPHOLDING SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS IN THE PANDEMIC

STORIES FROM THE KIBERA SLUMS

Editar Adhiambo Ochieng,

Founder, Feminist for Peace Rights and Justice Centre (FPRJC), Kenya

My name is Editar Adhiambo Ochieng founder of Feminist for Peace Rights and Justice Centre (FPRJC), a community based organization located in Kibera slums of Nairobi County, Kenya.

We work with survivors of sexual violence and specifically we have been focusing on prevention and response to violence against women and girls during COVID-19 pandemic in the Kibera settlement.

I work with a team of self-motivated young women who understand the problems of women and girls, are able to analyse the situation effectively, and are consistent in working with the community to find local solutions. This has brought positive impacts to their community and has changed the narrative of young women and leadership. The community has appreciated their power of service during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 brought school closures in its wake; as such, we have taken it upon ourselves to ensure continuity of education by establishing a community library where children can access books and we can nurture a reading culture. With the help of our partners Peace Brigades International, Inua Dada Foundation, and Amref Health Africa, among others, we have been able to distribute our dignity packs. These packs include panties, sanitary towels, and food donations to households that are vulnerable with the aim of sustaining women and children who have been survivors of sexual and gender based violence in the Kibera slums. We have also been helping survivors of SGBV report their cases, and referring survivors to psychosocial, medication and legal support as well as engaging the community both on-line and off-line on sexual matters and reproductive health. We have distributed contraceptives and condoms to young people to promote safer sex to avoid unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. COVID-19 requires

that people observe high standards of hygiene and as such, we have supported the community with water and water tanks for regular hand washing, masks for respiratory hygiene, and awareness on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

In all these, we experience burn out, emotional drain, financial constraints, and mental exhaustion. In most cases, WHRDs carry the burden of the community and end up forgetting about themselves, which makes self-care important.

My reflections on the future show me that teenage pregnancies and sexual violence in Kenya have reached a crisis situation and need to be identified as a national disaster. Teenage pregnancies will affect socio-economic livelihoods of our country as we experience school dropouts, increased rates of sexually transmitted infections, child negligence, and increase of violence among many more. We need to train women and girls how to curb future disasters to prevent escalating issues that affect them directly and the patriarchal systems that normalize issues that affect women and girls have to be addressed.

The future of girl children is at stake.



KENYA: PERIODS DON'T STOP DURING PANDEMICS

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID

Mercy Odondo,
Gender Dialogues, Kenya



Mercy is a Human Rights Defender, Actress, Trainer, YALI RLC Fellow, Kisumu Annual Human Rights Debate Founder and the Founding Director for Gender Dialogues.

Mercy, through her initiatives, uses theatre, debates, dialogues, and social media platforms to reach out to adolescent girls, young women, and sexual minority groups with an intention to provide safe spaces and to keep them safe away from all forms of violence. Mercy has created over five safe space dialogue forums that have reached out to 1,500 adolescent girls, young women, and sexual minority persons. She has organized four Annual Human Rights Debates that reached over 1000 University Students in Kisumu County.

In Kenya, listening to news every other day of a police officer raping a woman, a teacher defiling student, a woman raped in the hospital, chief defiling a child and many more cases of sexual abuse, you wonder who in the system do those already going through abuse should trust. Mercy has started an online panel dialogues on 'COVID-19 and SGBV' where she invites different people from lawyers, activists, police officers, gender recovery centre's officers, medics and the women themselves to talk about this. This portrays a challenge since most affected women and girls, or women and girls from very grassroots or rural areas, may not be conversant with using social media, perhaps cannot access the information while it is being aired, or are not even aware if they are going through abuse.

Through partnerships with other organizations, Mercy has, during the COVID-19 pandemic reached out to over 500 girls with sexual reproductive health rights education and sanitary towels. She has been, through her social media platforms, consistent in awareness creation on ending period stigma and poverty, ending sexual and gender-based violence, documentation of SGBV cases in regards to adolescent girls and young women in Kisumu County.

'Because periods don't stop during pandemics, girls have been exposed to risks of being sexually assaulted, access to sanitary towels and information has been a key challenge'.

These and other stories were shared in confidence and in our safe spaces in regards to what girls and women face in the community in which we work. I mobilized other networks and organizations to resource mobilize for sanitary towels, tissues papers, soaps, and sanitizers where I have reached out to 500 girls and more during the pandemic. Sometimes we get the needed resources, other times it fails because most of our partners have been overwhelmed during this time and there is still a gap.

Because we all don't know when the pandemic will come to an end, I commit to continue organizing safe spaces for adolescent girls and young women in my community now and beyond so that we continue to have a society of girls and women capable of making informed decisions in matters that involves and affect their lives.

TANZANIA, KENYA, UGANDA: THE OTHER PANDEMIC

MENTAL HEALTH DURING COVID-19

Esther Wanjiru, Legal Officer, Pan African Lawyers Union, Tanzania

Felicia Mburu, Africa Litigation Manager, Validity Foundation, Kenya

Primah Kwagala, Director, Women Probono Initiative, Uganda

As the world battles the adverse effects of the coronavirus that was declared a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, a different pandemic is on the rise - mental health and psychosocial challenges. The World Health Organization estimates that 45% of women and girls in Africa have experienced GBV in their lifetime.

In East Africa, the figures range from 62% in Uganda, 32% of young women and 18% of their male counterparts reported experiencing sexual violence in Kenya; and Lifetime Physical and/or Sexual Intimate Partner violence at 46.2% in Tanzania. However, the facts and figures point to marginalization, the exclusion of women and girls with mental disabilities. Women and girls with mental disabilities are particularly more vulnerable to intimate partner violence, sexual violence in the community and violations sanctioned by legal systems and practices yet this is marginalized due to culture, societal perceptions, and legal systems. Whilst COVID-19 has brought these vulnerabilities to the foreground, there needs to be a systematic sustainable response to violence against women and girls with disabilities.

Felicia Mburu from Validity Foundation stated, **“before COVID cases of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls with disabilities did exist but weren't so many. Then the pandemic came to Kenya and I started getting two calls a week for legal advice, soon I was involved in mediating access to medication in public hospitals as job cuts caused more persons to relapse. Unfortunately, lockdown measures by the Kenyan government led to withdrawal of community outreaches which was a lifeline to person with**

psychosocial disabilities especially the counselling services required for gender-based violence. Six months later I am now dealing with gender-based violence against men with psychosocial disabilities and it is clear the psychosocial issues will be in Kenya long after the pandemic is gone.”

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities particularly highlights the issue of women and girls with Article 6 calling for state parties to ensure the full development, advancement, and empowerment of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Systematic gender biases and perceptions of disability have been ingrained in most East African cultures, laws and systems thus exposing women and girls with mental disabilities to sexual and gender-based violence.

Primah Kwagala from Women Probono Initiative in Uganda observed that by May 1st, 2020 the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MoGLSD) reported that between 28th March and 28th April, 2020, some 3,280 cases of gender based violence had been recorded by the Uganda government with 283 cases being violence against children.

“We provided legal aid to women with disabilities who lived on the street as they had nowhere to go yet the government arrested them for breaking lockdown measures. Upon release, there was no transport to take them to the village and shelters for victims of gender-based violence were all full. I ended up housing some women in my home, others it was safer to leave them

in prison. Public transport was also shut down, so those with homes outside Kampala were unable to travel. Some shelters required that victims of GBV be tested for HIV and STIs before they were given haven. Most of the women with psychosocial disabilities who lived in the streets had some STIs and that is where the stigma started, the shelters terming them as sex workers instead of women with disabilities, thus denying them accommodation. WPI became known as the organization representing sex workers. WPI continues the fight to support the right of women and girls with disabilities to be protected from sexual and gender-based violence.”



In Tanzania UNFPA reported an increase in gender-based violence, specifically femicide and FGM cases. The Legal Human Rights Centre attributed the rise to economic hardships despite Tanzania being the only East African Country that did not implement any lockdowns or curfews. Esther Wanjiru from Tanzania pointed out that mothers of children with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities seemed to be the hardest hit by the economic crisis. Most of them were small-scale traders whose income was affected by the economic situation.



“As lawyers it was like wading through the darkness of poverty with no light to shine on them. Best we could do was link them up to organisations that provide food and social services as we waited for the pandemic to pass.”

In conclusion, there needs to be a systematic long-term approach to address violence against women and girls with psychosocial disabilities in East Africa. This calls for legal reform and community inclusion to dismantle the perceptions on women and girls with disabilities to remove the vulnerabilities exposing them to sexual and gender-based violence. Data collection must be desegregated to include disability to provide appropriate psychosocial support.





**Environmental
activism in the
pandemic**

SOUTH AFRICA: ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN A PANDEMIC

DEMANDING RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS PRACTICES DURING COVID-19

Margaret Ghogha Molomo,

Deputy Chairperson, Mining and Environmental Justice
Community Network of South Africa (MEJCON-SA), and
Coordinator, Kopano Formation Committee, South Africa

Margaret Ghogha Molomo is an environmental activist from the Masodi village, Mokopane in the Limpopo Province in South Africa. Margaret serves as a deputy chairperson for the Mining and Environmental Justice Community Network of South Africa (MEJCON-SA) and as a coordinator for her community-based organisation called the Kopano Formation Committee.

Margaret's activist work involves fighting against destructive mining companies that violate people's constitutional right to a healthy environment. She also works closely with women through the cultivation of food gardening. In addition, her community is very cultural, and there are certain cultural activities that she facilitates that are undertaken during the course of the year, particularly by women.

COVID-19 has substantially affected Margaret's activism work. The bulk of her work requires association and freedom of movement. She needs to continuously mobilise and educate her community. However, most notably, is the struggle to conduct this work virtually. Margaret's community is in deep rural areas where connectivity has always been an issue. Most of her community members do not have the necessary communication resources required to ensure inclusion and participation in processes and critical engagements.



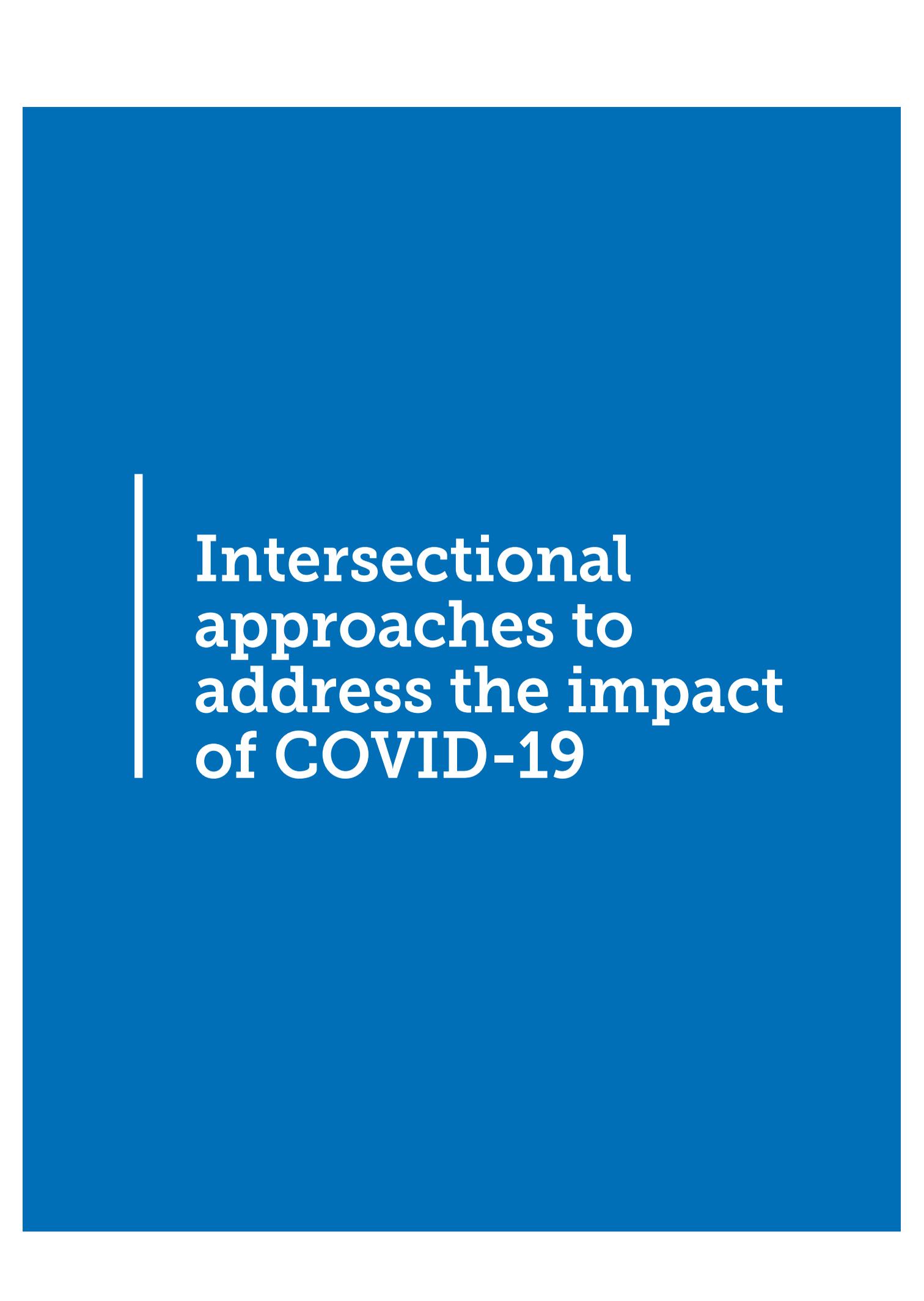
Margaret says it is important to note that the participation of women, even under normal circumstances, has always been a challenge in traditional villages where cultural systems have a way of suppressing and disregarding the voices of women. This exclusion has now been magnified by the new communication requirements imposed by the pandemic.

Restriction on movement also means that women cannot easily continue their normal daily survival activities such as fetching wood and water for cooking and heating during the winter season. Women are also unable to travel to town to sell their harvests in order to obtain some form of income for their families.

Margaret adds that important cultural rituals like women going to the mountains for their annual initiation rites, the collection of herbs for the rain ritual, and visiting graveyards have all had to be suspended due to the pandemic. These rituals are important for the psychological and spiritual wellbeing of the entire community, but especially the wellbeing of women. Margaret's community has fought for the protection of significant heritage sites against mining operations and it is unfortunate that yet another challenge has emerged which is preventing them from exercising their cultural rights.

Margaret is also concerned that the mine that she and her organisation are fighting against may capitalise on the restrictions by not complying with licences and the law. Her organisation was planning a protest against the mine for its non-compliances, but because of the lockdown, they had to postpone doing so.

Margaret has emphasised that women have a number of immediate responsibilities towards their families and communities. She says that the pandemic has further added to the burdens borne by women.



**Intersectional
approaches to
address the impact
of COVID-19**

COMOROS: THE FEELING OF THE END OF THE WORLD

REFLECTIONS FROM A WOMEN'S RIGHTS DEFENDER

Maimouna Ibrahim,

Head of Department, in charge of Gender Promotion at the National Gender Commission, Coordinator of the National Network of Women Leaders for Peace in the Comoros, Union of the Comoros

Since the COVID-19 health crisis started in Wuhan, I had a feeling of fear, telling me that there was a great chance that, unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic would spread worldwide. At some point in the evolution of the crisis, I had a feeling of "the end of the world." Following the international news reporting on the number of deaths and positive cases of COVID-19, I guess many people had the same feeling as I did.

But the Comoros was one of the countries where the disease was introduced very late and till one point I felt a sense of hope, until the first case of COVID-19 was announced in the Comoros. It was a false hope sadly, as from day to day, cases of COVID-19 have been fast increasing in a country of less than one million people. To date, more than three hundred cases have been reported in the Union of the Comoros with seven deaths.

As a mother, a women's rights activist, in my capacity as head of department in charge of gender promotion and coordinator of the National Network of Women Leaders for Peace, and also a member of FemWise Africa, I have thought a lot about this subject that has invaded the world and killed millions of people. Here are the actions I have taken:

- **Protect myself by following distancing measures.**
- **Protect my family by reducing travel and respecting distancing measures.**

- **Contribute to the establishment of a village management committee for COVID-19 for the protection of villagers.**
- **Develop a plan to combat Gender-Based Violence within the framework of COVID-19 and within the framework of the National Commission for Solidarity, Social Protection and Gender Promotion.**
- **Be part of the trainers of the community relays on the management of COVID-19.**
- **Be on the ground for the sensitization and distribution of protection and control kits against COVID-19.**
- **Be in the field to fight GBV and stigmatization within the framework of COVID-19.**

Today the world is shaken by the coronavirus, a disease for which no vaccine has yet been discovered. Even if some people are cured, even if one day COVID-19 will be definitively eradicated in all countries, we must always remain vigilant because nature has its surprises. It is therefore necessary to remember this:

- **Remain in solidarity with good deeds in front of everyone, especially loved ones.**
- **Do not destroy nature, we must contribute a lot to sustainable development.**
- **We must always work for the rights of everyone.**
- **Always remain sensitive to the most vulnerable by accompanying them in all sectors.**



GHANA: EMPOWERMENT DURING COVID-19

WORKING WITH PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame,

Global Advocacy Advisor (Social Inclusion), Sightsavers, Member, United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, President, International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (Africa), Board Member, Ghana Federation of Disability Organisations, Commissioner, World Council of Churches, Ghana

As a Women Human Rights Defender and a person with disability, the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled me to further diversify engagement strategies with my primary constituents comprising persons with disabilities, particularly in the global south.



Communication with these constituents located across Africa, with most in deprived communities, has been challenging as most have limited access to electronic and mobile communication devices due to financial barriers. Additionally, knowledge of the use of the devices and limited internet access affect the interaction required to address pressing human rights situations arising as a result of the pandemic. Notwithstanding, I have had the opportunity to work through representative organisations.

At the beginning of the pandemic, most national responses were not inclusive of women and girls with disabilities. They faced a greater risk of discrimination as social isolation measures implemented during the pandemic mostly increased gender-based violence, with most women and girls with disabilities 'locked down' at home with their abusers. Girls with disabilities learning from home faced accessibility barriers, which hindered continuous education. As most women with disabilities work in informal sectors, restrictive measures meant to contain the spread of COVID-19 had devastating toll on their economic and social wellbeing. Women's role as caregivers at home and in care institutions as well as female-headed households, placed them in situations that threatened their livelihoods and deepened poverty levels. This reduced access to financial resources to stock for essential food, medicine, and services to sustain themselves and their families. The short and long-term implications for their livelihoods worsened as unemployment figures increased worldwide. Fear of infections compelled most women and girls with disabilities to distance themselves from health facilities, depriving themselves of needed

care during pregnancy, sexual and reproductive health situations. In partnership with women human rights defenders across the globe I mobilized women through virtual platforms, using radio interviews, blogs, tweets, e-mails, Skype calls, WhatsApp calls, Zoom meetings and other social media avenues. At Sightsavers, I was active in collecting signatures and calling on the United Nations to urge state parties to be responsive to the needs of women, girls, and other underrepresented groups, during and beyond the pandemic; an initiative that received positive feedback. As a member of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, I have made presentations through a series of webinars convened by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), International Disability Alliance (IDA), International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC), to engage duty bearers on intersectional discrimination faced by women and girls with disabilities.

These initiatives empowered women and girls with disabilities to contribute to discussions and assert their rights to accessible information, humanitarian aid, healthcare, social protection and participation in COVID-19 response initiatives. Through these partnerships, a reasonable level of risk and humanitarian responses are now more inclusive of persons with disabilities.

NIGERIA: AT THE MARGINS

SUPPORTING RURAL WOMEN IN ENUGU STATE

Ijeoma Joy Oguadimma,

Executive Director, Women Empowerment Education and Peacebuilding Initiative (WEPBI), Nigeria

Progressive increases in the number of COVID-19 cases led to series of lockdown extension with resultant increases in untold hardship and hunger. The impact is mostly felt in rural areas where a great number of people depend on daily income from sales of petty crops from the farm.

Women in rural areas have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Many of them have lost family members, hunger is prevalent, and an increase of domestic violence has been observed. Women have come to our office with all kinds of bruises, many homes were damaged, husbands could not take care of their families, and many children face malnutrition. To reduce the spread of COVID-19, a total lockdown was imposed by the government. These movement restrictions have strongly affected the livelihoods of the rural women, who often depend on farming and petty trading. To survive and provide food for their families, many rural women have seen themselves obliged to break the lockdown laws and go to the market. They say that if they do not cater for their families no one else will do so they do not have a choice but to visit the market or to go work on someone's farm.

WEPBI is currently running a project in four rural communities in Enugu State Nigeria. We visited the communities to distribute food items and hygiene articles such as soap and face masks to these women with the emphasis on elderly, lactating mothers and pregnant women due to their vulnerability. Young girls also received sanitary pads to prevent possible reproductive system infections due to the use of unhygienic materials during their menstruation period such as tissues and pieces of cloth. To identify these women and girls, we had contacted women leaders in all selected communities, informing them about our planned activities and asking them to compile the names of all the women in the communities within the target group. Still, we experienced many challenges while going to those communities; passing through many checkpoints, while still maintaining social distancing caused delays to our journey.

In one of the communities we visited, Ndeaboh community of Enugu state, an elderly widow who has lost all her children could not contain her joy; she told us that she depended on others for her food. She had been living on the mercy of neighbours and friends, but since the lockdown it had been extremely difficult for her to eat and her helpers were unable to provide her with food anymore.

Wiping away these women's tears and knowing that they will have food for one month, I was both overjoyed yet heartbroken. I was very grateful for the opportunity to enlighten and educate them on how to stay safe. At the same time, I learnt a lot from those women and was able to see what they are enduring in the rural areas. I wish I could do more to support them.



NIGERIA: HAND TO MOUTH

CHALLENGES OF ALMAJIRI IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

Sarah Anlade Dantsoho,

Project Desk Officer, Voice of Disability Initiative (VDI), Nigeria

During the global pandemic a lot of Almajiri children were deeply affected. Almajiri are children, usually from poor rural backgrounds, who leave their hometowns to study Islamic learning and live from either begging, working in the form of running errands or performing small chores.

Most of them lack formal literacy and are an at-risk community. Once COVID-19 hit, many tried to run home to their parents in their different communities, while some were trapped due to the government ban on people traveling. The work to ensure a total lockdown did not consider the situation of these childrens lives and how they could survive under lockdown.

During the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, a rumour spread that the Almajiri were carriers of COVID-19; this made it more difficult for them to survive because the people who usually provided them remnants of their food no longer welcomed them or allowed them in their vicinity. It is both pathetic and tragic that no adequate measures were put in place by the government for the Almajiri who were living in some of the shabbiest conditions imaginable, with many facing nutritional challenges, and lacking access to essential services.

Months into the peak of the pandemic the State Governors' Forum in Nigeria finally agreed to take action to resolve the crisis faced by the children, after leaving them exposed at the initial phase of the spread of the virus with no informal structures such as religious and traditional institutions to support them during the COVID-19 pandemic.



As a child rights advocate and WHRD, I decided I needed to be in the frontline to help these children in whatever small way I could. I led my team towards providing them with food and non-food items like facemasks, water drums, hand wash, soap, bags of rice, eggs, gallons of oil, and the like. With support from LEAP Africa, my team and I were able to provide these palliatives for 10 days to over 200 Almajiri, following WHO guidelines creating awareness amongst all these children, including teaching them how to use the masks.

Many of my colleagues were afraid to participate, but I had already made up my mind not to ignore the problem of hunger and virus within these most vulnerable children, especially during the pandemic. At one point, people began to literally run away from me because I had associated myself with the Almajiri but I did not care, as I'd decided it was more important to care for those who are most vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic.

UGANDA: THE IMPACT OF THE LEADERS

CHALLENGES FACING LBQ PERSONS

AMIDST COVID-19 MEASURES

Ssenfuka Joanita Warry,

Executive Director, Freedom and Roam Uganda
(FARUG), Uganda

2020 is a year we will all live to remember. It is the year a deadly pandemic, COVID-19, hit us globally. In our country, everything went on hold after an abruptly lockdown.

The pandemic did not only attack our health but also affected us economically, spiritually, and mentally. Many LBQ suffered under the hands of their tormentors: due to discrimination from local area residents many didn't benefit from the food distribution by the government; many lost jobs and access to health facilities as employers found COVID-19 a convenient excuse to lay off workers. LBQ women living with HIV and those living in rural areas were disproportionately impacted by this.

As LBQ women activists, we continue to face misogyny, homophobia, and heteronormativity as we respond to the exigencies of our community members during this COVID-19 lockdown period. Power dynamics and social norms expose us and our members to a unique set of human rights violations discrimination, even from our family members; lack of food, and difficulties in accessing health care, housing, and employment. While we make an effort to advance the well-being of all LBQ persons and achieving social justice in Uganda, we still face the struggle to access funding particularly as LBQ organisations in Uganda. During the lockdown period, we managed to issue a call to both donors and individuals to support LBQ organizing to which we received some positive responses.

Due to the strict measures put in place by our government many LBQ women were forced to move back to the homes of either their parents or other relatives. In consequence, during the lockdown, we registered many violent attacks towards LBQ women from either their families or community members. We also noticed an increase in cases of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). However, amidst all the



challenges, we made sure that we stayed active on the ground, identifying such cases, and intervening. We had standby counsellors to help the victims and, with the help of our legal partners, offered legal assistance to the different LBQ women who were victims of the lockdown. Our peer educators were available to make sure that members on ARVs received their medication and nutritional support. Even without any source of funding for emergencies, Leaders had to find means of providing food and other necessities, such as pads, to our members since they always ran to us for rescue and expected leader to be in position to help them at all cost.

This period has made me reflect on how best we can organise the LBQ community in Uganda, on how we can help members to plan ahead of such unprecedented risks. As a leader, it showed me gaps we tend to overlook as we attempt to care for our members.

A friend asked me **“who looks out for the leaders”** since they spend so much time online and offline trying to look for solutions to the exigencies of the members. I told them **“a leader will always put their members at the fore front of their plan for solutions. Every impact leader makes on others keeps them going.”**

However, I have noticed that concern has always popped up during different discussion with my fellow Leaders. We tend to overlook our wellbeing. Many of us LBQ leaders, fell victims to the different effects of the lockdown. We must accept that the lockdown has not only affected our membership but also the leaders.

ZIMBABWE: COVID-19

THE TRANSFORMATION OF POWER AND THE IMPORTANCE OF AN INTERSECTIONAL RESPONSE

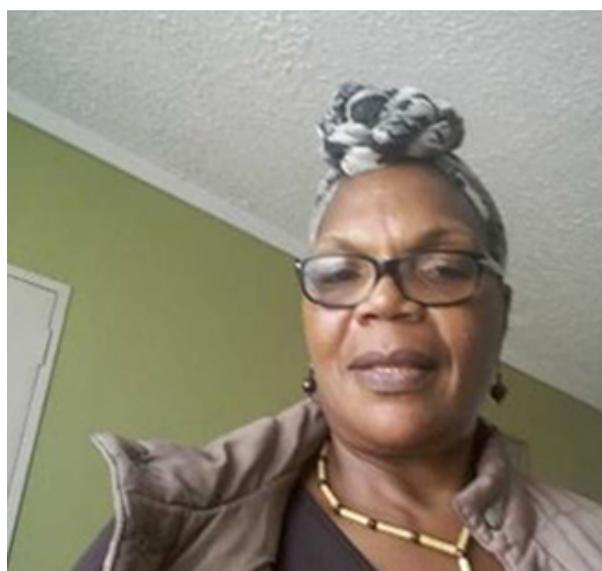
Agatha Chapeyama,

Programs Coordinator/Finance, Peacebuilding and Capacity Development, Zimbabwe

Before the prolonged COVID-19 induced disruptions, I always thought it was acceptable to sacrifice some level of democracy and freedom for better living conditions.

I have now changed my attitude; without democracy and freedom, the truth of the outbreak in my home city Mutare is scary. It is only when stress begins to impair the individual that we consider it problematic. By not going to work, there is a certain loss that the individual may experience or fear of the loss, which may be stressful. It could be loss of income or social interaction. Failure to cope and adjust to the losses or incapacity to manage fears of possible losses may catapult the individual to feelings of depression and anxiety. Through reflecting about actions at work and concrete experiences, it has led me to recognize that COVID-19 has forced me to physically avoid from friends, workmates, crowds, and other activities like eating out and attending funerals. I have realized that the pandemic must not function as a cover for repressive action under the guise of protecting health nor should it be used to silence the work of human rights defenders.

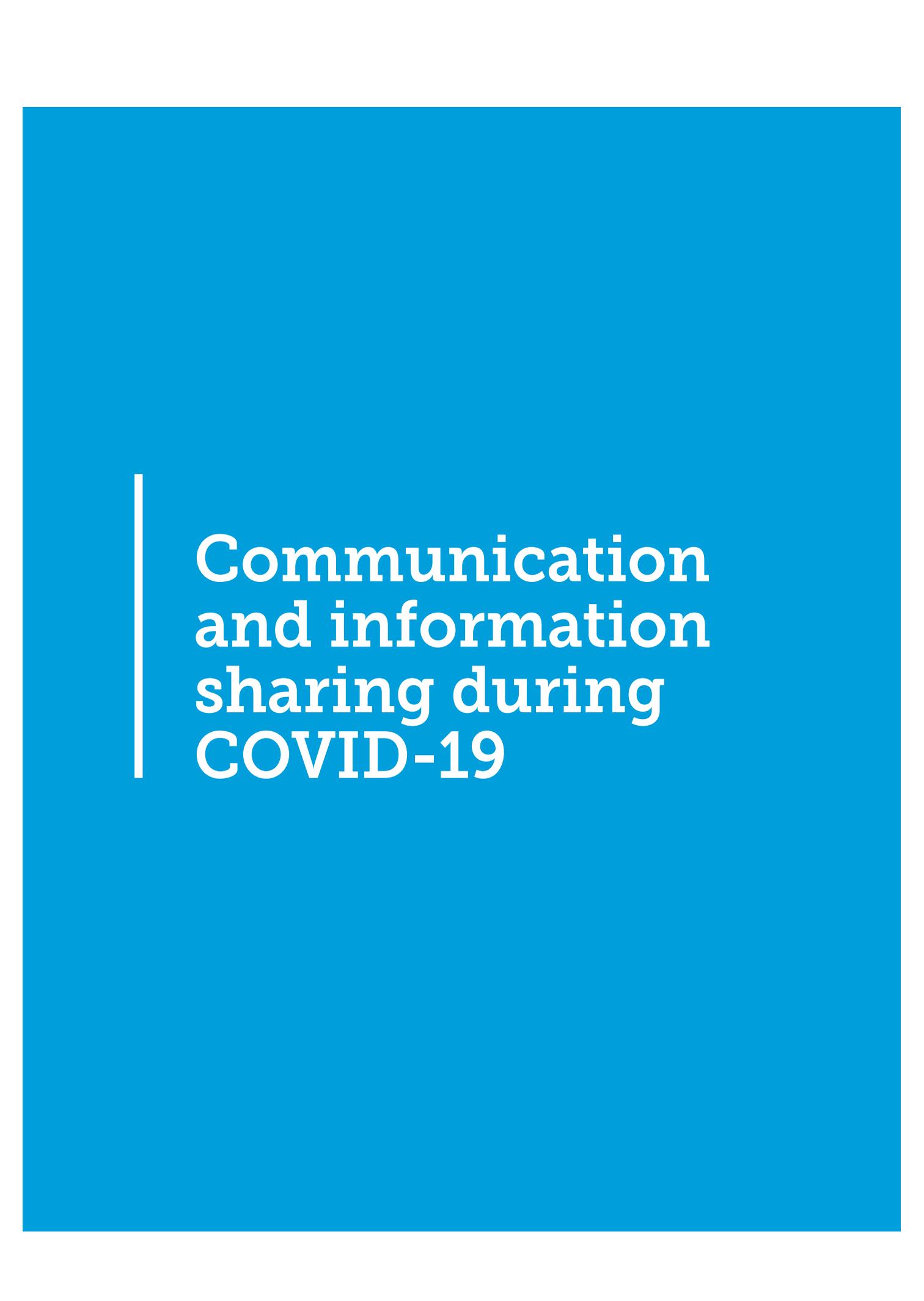
The lockdown has imposed a certain loss to my experience as an individual, and increased fears of losing my job and financial worries have created tensions and strains accentuated by the cramped living conditions of lockdown. Enhanced government power, increased militarization, and police presence have, like the virus, become the new normal. Now living on half-salary as I am not working normal hours, has become stressful. During this period, my job moves in slow motion as I now work mostly from home and all management meetings are virtual and expensive since these airtime expenses were not initially budgeted for by the organisation.



These technologies will make my work of human rights defender significantly more challenging both in the context of the virus itself and once it has passed, with the likelihood of continued monitoring of movements and work by the government.

There is still a long way to go for the voice of women human rights defenders to be treated equally to that of other groups in the country. I have come to understand that it is critical to ensure that all measures adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are intersectional; that they should cover the needs of all women, including migrant, rural and women with different disabilities.

With the world focused on the pandemic, it is clear that the government is taking its powers at a time their citizens cannot mobilise to protest and challenge the authorities. There is a growing concern that when this crisis passes, human rights defenders in a number of countries will be facing greater security risks as a result of measures passed to, ostensibly, deal with the pandemic.



**Communication
and information
sharing during
COVID-19**

NIGERIA: DISSEMINATING INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 IN THE IGBO LANGUAGE

Miriam Menkiti,

Founder and Executive Director, Women Information Network (WINET), Nigeria

The novel coronavirus took the world by storm. No country, city, or community was prepared for the devastating effects that COVID-19 brought with it - a deadly disease, previously unknown.

People needed to know more about it, to protect themselves from infection. The need arose to provide information on its symptoms, mode of transmission, and prevention practices. Reports from other countries of high numbers of deaths from COVID-19 were frightening. I thought of women and girls, already marginalized by society, many of them vulnerable and poor, as they do not ordinarily have access to information. I thought of how to best reach out to them in their communities with vital information on COVID-19. I know that they have a right to information; a right to know what is happening around them to enable them to protect their children and families. I also realized that it was crucial to provide this information in their local language for easy understanding.

It became imperative to use both traditional and social media to disseminate information to ensure the widest possible coverage. I quickly put pen to paper and developed jingles to be aired in the Igbo language on three radio stations reaching over 2.5 million people in both rural and urban areas in Enugu State. The messages focused on symptoms of COVID-19, advised women trading in markets to maintain social distancing, and told members of the society that the aim of the lockdown was for safety and should not become a time in which violence against women and girls was perpetuated. Fliers containing messages on COVID-19 symptoms and prevention guidelines in Igbo language were also produced and distributed.

Wearing facemasks and taking along buckets of water, soap and sanitizers, my team and I headed to three communities (Akagbe-Ugwu, Ugwuogo-Nike and Awkunanaw) to disseminate information on COVID-19 to women and girls. The information included advice on basic regular hand washing under running water with soap, constant use of hand sanitizers, wearing a facemask, not shaking

hands with or hugging anyone, as well as the importance of maintaining social distancing.



At Ugwogo-Nike, one of the women, Louisa Eketé said:

“People were talking about coronavirus and advising us on wearing face masks but we did not understand because it is new to us. Now, it has become clearer to us. The fliers are very useful; we will share with our families.”

During our interaction with young girls at Maria Assumpta Catholic Parish Awkunanaw, one of them said: **“Your initiative to enlighten us about the Corona virus at this time is appreciated. I promise to share with my parents and siblings.”**

Pictures and videos of these activities were shared on our Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook platforms to promote further awareness.

This project was achieved by Women Information Network (WINET) under the Women’s Voice and Leadership Nigeria project, in partnership with ActionAid Nigeria & funded by Global Affairs Canada.

NIGERIA: THE SAFETY CHIC

TACKLING COVID-19 FROM A SAFETY EDUCATION ANGLE

Ugochi Obidiegwu,

Managing partner, The Safety Chic, Nigeria

One of the major challenges during the pandemic was the proliferation of false information, causing more fear and panic than the virus itself. Therefore, Ugochi Obidiegwu, also known as The Safety Chic due to her work in raising safety consciousness, decided to step up her safety education efforts.

For the pandemic, her interventions were focused in two major directions - for children and for adults. She wrote a child safety story booklet on the coronavirus - The Adventures of Muna: A kid-to-kid guide on the Coronavirus. The booklet used a story, African characters, questions, colouring activities, and a maze to pass on the safety message in a fun but enlightening way to children. This booklet, also available in French, was made available for free to all children through a collaboration with other safety professionals via www.thesafetychic.com. 1000 booklets were produced and distributed to children in 6 states in Nigeria. Ugochi hosted three virtual book-reading events for children in collaboration with the Bookworm Cafe, Total Nigeria and the US Consulate, Lagos where over 300 children got to hear the story from the coronavirus booklet and other stories in her child safety book series. She also partnered with 9ijakids, a Nigerian educational technology company, to create an online game to prepare children for safe school resumption in a pandemic.

For adults, Ugochi introduced her safety education app - The Safety Chic Compass. Her goal was to ensure that regardless of location, African parents and teachers could access safety content that suited their uniquely African context from the comfort of their mobile devices. She also engaged in social media sensitisation, teaching correct safety steps to take on a variety of issues like preparing for possible post-COVID-19 school resumptions, working safely from home, and online safety for children to mention a few. Till today, she continues trainings on safety measures via Zoom,



Facebook, and Instagram in order to reach more people. She hosted the fourth edition of her annual School Safety Summit virtually in May. At the event, participants who were predominantly female got to learn how to administer first aid for a variety of scenarios, most especially in this period of the pandemic.

While Ugochi made some progress in raising safety consciousness, there were some challenges to her and her beneficiaries. COVID-19 cut off women and girls from receiving safety interventions that they would have accessed if there were no restrictions on movement. For example, last year during the annual School Safety Summit, there were over 400 teachers present, 85% of them were women, and many came from low-income schools. However, due to the pandemic, it was just over 100 participants, the majority female. Considering that prior to the pandemic, arrangements had been made with an Education district to train about 400 teachers, this was a disappointing outcome. We discovered that many women had had to make a choice between feeding their families and joining online programmes that require data and internet connectivity. This also affected the abilities of their children to access online education platforms. For the girls, since physical sessions with them were no longer possible, booklets were sent to their communities by partnering with organisations who were distributing palliatives in those communities. Feedback received told us that the booklets were helpful because of the use of stories and fun learning activities. Personally, funding sources became tight, affecting our beneficiaries and cash flow. One donor partnering with us to provide training and safety education materials to female public schools in three states in the North and East had to withhold funds due to the pandemic. We are hopeful that we will still be able to execute that project after the worst of this blows over. Nevertheless, we are glad that we were able to use creativity, abilities, and partnerships to play a role in this important time in history.



Civic space and the pandemic

KENYA: PARALEGALS AS WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

THE EXPERIENCE OF KENYA

Mary Konchellah, Paralegal Project Coordinator, Transmara, Kenya

Judith Wangari, Paralegal Community Based Organisation Coordinator, Meru, Kenya

Wanjiru Ndung'u, Paralegal Network coordinator, Kwale, Kenya

The novel coronavirus took the world by storm. No country, city, or community was prepared for the devastating effects that COVID-19 brought with it - a deadly disease, previously unknown.



Mary Konchellah,
Transmara Paralegal Project coordinator

The Kenyan Section of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ Kenya) coordinates a network of paralegals in the counties of Trans Mara, Taita Taveta, Kwale, Kitui, Meru, and Laikipia counties. Paralegals play an integral role in increasing access to justice avenues and promoting human rights for indigent and marginalized persons at the grassroots and community levels. Out of the six ICJ Kenya paralegal networks, three of the network coordinators in Trans Mara, Kwale, and Meru are Women Human Rights Defenders.

Whereas the Kenyan government issued directives to curb the spread of COVID-19, ICJ Kenya noted with concern that the implementation of the directives, led to an increase in human rights violations. The impact of some of the directives has disproportionately affected the poor, vulnerable, and marginalised communities.

Physical distancing directives have posed a big challenge to the paralegals because they are unable to use modern communication technology and tools considering the majority of the people in the grassroots areas neither own nor have access to smart phones or computers.

Below are the personal experiences of the paralegals:

The closing of schools was met with excitement by many children but this was not the case for girls who considered school a safe haven. We received regular reports of girls escaping from their homes because their parents wanted to marry them off. Some parents were forced to exchange their children for food because they could no longer afford to buy food. Similarly, there has been a rise in child marriages and teenage pregnancies in Transmara during the COVID-19 period. Moreover, carrying out our work as paralegals during the pandemic has been extremely difficult because the nature of our interventions cannot be conducted remotely. For this reason, we keep our offices open and ensure that we comply with government guidelines and use hand sanitizers. When we receive clients, who are not wearing masks, we take it upon ourselves to contribute money and buy them masks. We have also tried to foster close relationships with chiefs and councils of elders to facilitate our work. We receive complaints from all the parties themselves, including chiefs, and village elders. When we receive complaints of early child marriages, for example, we report the matter to the police station and enter the complaint in the occurrence book. After that, we call the parents of both the man and girl involved in order to explain to them why a girl who has not reached 18 years, under the law, cannot be married off. Subsequently, we take both parties

to the hospital for an age assessment where they also conduct a HIV and pregnancy test. After this the man is charged in court for defilement and any other offence depending on the circumstances



Judith Wangari,
Meru Paralegal Community Based Organisation Coordinator

We have always received several complaints of domestic violence in Meru but the lockdown has led to an increase in the number of cases and women being more vulnerable, particularly those trapped in abusive relationships. Notably, there has been a surge in the number of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) cases in Meru during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, social distancing directives made our work challenging because the majority of our target groups do not have computers and smart phones. We therefore partnered with the area chief and conducted door to door visits in some villages. For cases of IPV, we advise the women to file or lodge formal complaint at the police station. However, the women face challenges in reporting due to a lack of knowledge on the exact terminology to use. Many women were reporting it as domestic violence and the police would say that there is no crime designated domestic violence, hence letting them go back to their abusers. We also advise them to get all necessary documents such as the medical examination report. In addition to this, we recommend that they consider seeking refuge in relatives' home if it is not safe for them to go back to their abusers. Meru does not have safe houses for women.



Wanjiru Ndung'u,
Kwale Paralegal Network coordinator

The hotel industry is one of the biggest employers in Kwale as it is a tourist destination. This industry is amongst the worst hit during the COVID-19 period leading to job losses. There has been an escalation in the number of women who have been laid off from the hotel industry in Kwale which has had a ripple effect on their dependents, particularly in cases where they are the sole breadwinners. Without financial independence, women lose their decision-making power and often stay in abusive relationships. Many of these women have opted to be casual labourers, but men are preferred to women for these jobs. Our main work as paralegals is to provide legal aid to members of the community and empower them to seek justice when their rights are violated. In this regard, we became members of a volunteer group called Together Fordiani whose main objective is to support vulnerable families. Through this, we have been able to support over 5000 families within Kwale through food distribution.

SOMALIA: TAKING CARE IS NOT ENOUGH

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ON THE FRONTLINES

Mohamed Nor Ibrahim,

Executive Director, South Somali Youth Organization, Somalia

COVID-19 underscores society's reliance on women, both on the front line and at home, while simultaneously exposing structural inequalities across every sphere, from health to the economy, from security to social protection. In times of crisis, with strained resources and limited institutional capacity, women and girls face disproportionate impacts with far reaching consequences that are only further amplified in contexts of fragility, conflict, and emergencies. Hard-fought gains for women's rights are threatened.

Restrictions on movement, closure of social spaces and other limitations have forced SSYO to find alternative ways to mobilize and defend human rights, often using technology. The organization has done much to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic, raising awareness through billboards, media, audio media, visual media and mobile text messages. The most vulnerable and targeted community were internally displaced people (IDPs). We tried to provide instructions on how to detect signs of COVID-19 and how it was transmitted, information on practising social distancing, hygiene and the use of facemasks. However, we faced institutional challenges as member contributions were in decline due to COVID-19.

By early April 2020, Somali banks reported that remittances from some countries had ceased completely and that the overall decline was at least 40 percent and falling. International banks have long been fearful of handling cash destined for Somalia because of regulations concerning anti-money laundering (AML) and countering the financing of terrorism (CFT), and the risk of large fines for any errors. Somali banks and MTBs are often denied access to bank accounts and electronic payment systems by international banks. Consequently, they have little choice but to carry huge amounts of banknotes from diaspora host countries to financial centres, like Dubai and Nairobi, and finally onwards into Somalia. COVID-19-related airport closures, airline route

suspensions, and quarantines now prevent the transfer of banknotes into Somalia. SSYO is working to address some of the most pressing challenges related to the reduction of remittances in order to bolster and safeguard financial institutions, businesses, and families during the COVID-19 crisis.

Human rights are guaranteed under international law but working to ensure that they are realised and taking up the cases of those who have had their rights violated can be a dangerous business. Human Rights Defenders are often the only force standing between ordinary people and the unbridled power of the state. Human Rights Defenders often face harassment, detention, torture, defamation, suspension from their place of employment, denial of freedom of movement, and difficulty in obtaining legal recognition for their associations. In some cases, they are killed or "disappeared." Over the last few years, general awareness has increased of the enormous risk human rights defenders face in their work. The risk is easy to identify when defenders work in hostile situations, for instance, if a country's laws penalise people who do certain types of human rights work. Defenders are also at risk when the law fully sanctions human rights work on the one hand but fails to punish those who threaten or attack defenders on the other. In armed conflict situations, the risk becomes even higher. Apart from a few chaotic situations during which a defender's life may be in the hands of soldiers at a checkpoint, the violence committed against defenders cannot be called indiscriminate. In most cases, violent attacks are a deliberate and well-planned response to defenders' work and linked to a clear political or military agenda. These challenges require human rights defenders to implement comprehensive and dynamic security strategies in their day-to-day work. Giving defenders well-meant advice or recommending that they "take care" is not enough. Better security management is key.



ZIMBABWE: STAYING ALIVE AND DEMANDING ACCOUNTABILITY

EXPERIENCES FROM WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN ZIMBABWE

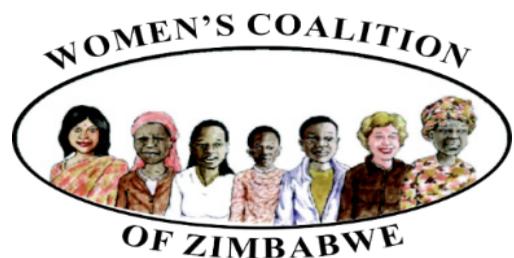
Sally Ncube,

Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe

Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) in Zimbabwe are amongst those that have taken the biggest hit from COVID-19. In a socio-political context, where, ordinarily the level of democracy is very low and the quality of governance very poor, a global pandemic of this magnitude, has only aggravated political instability in the country. This has been characterized by policy inconsistencies and the introduction, and implementation, of sweeping restrictions on the fundamental freedoms of movement and assembly.

The numerous containment regulations put in place by Government, have not made it easy for WHRDs to navigate in order to service communities. Suffice to point out that COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown, have aggravated the shrinking civil space in Zimbabwe. It is a fair conclusion to assert that the lockdown has been used as a tool by the authorities, not only to curtail the work of WHRDs in Zimbabwe, but also to introduce critical socio-political changes to the democratic structures of the country, while the rest of the nation is coping with the lockdown restrictions.

There have been several reports recorded in the country pointing to the State victimization of WHRDs. Reference can be drawn to the recent Constitutional amendment process, which was rolled out in the midst of a pandemic. Parliament went on to conduct public hearings on Constitutional Amendment Bill No. 2, at a time when citizens movements were restricted and public gatherings were limited to 50 people. Several WHRDs objected to this, and two young women staged a demo. The two WHRDs were immediately arrested for violating lockdown regulations. Another case is of three WHRDs and political activists who were abducted and subsequently arrested after they had demonstrated against hunger



and the economic turmoil during the lockdown.

The situation obtaining in Zimbabwe therefore dictates that WHRDs stay vigilant and ensure that the rights of women are not trampled upon in these trying times, while at the same time ensuring that they are not found wanting by the law. This means that WHRDs have to balance two critical competing interests: to stay alive, while on the other hand, holding authorities to account for any women's rights violations.

The dilemma does not end there, WRHDs in Zimbabwe, by the nature of their work, serve communities, especially grassroots communities, by delivering programs that require active and physical engagement. WRHDs have therefore had to strategize to ensure that they strike a balance between prioritization of the communities' safety from COVID-19, while also delivering programs and services to women during this critical time. This has seen WRHDs, heavily relying on the use of bulk SMS, community radio, and skits and short dramas circulated on WhatsApp groups to raise awareness on COVID-19 and ensure that communities stay safe. Most WRHDs such as WCoZ have been supporting grassroots community women to take part on these platforms by facilitating communication and airtime for them, in order to ensure that they access information.

ZIMBABWE: COVID-19 IN CONFINEMENT

SUPPORTING FEMALE PRISONERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

Beauty Rita Nyampinga,

Director, Female Prisoner Support Trust (FEMPRIST), Zimbabwe

COVID-19 came at a time when the whole world was unprepared for such a pandemic. In Zimbabwe, the pandemic was declared a State of Emergency on March 30th, 2020. At first, the lockdown was for 21 days, later extended to 14 days, and then indefinitely.

The measures put into place saw the closing of operating spaces for both individuals and organisation. As a WHRD I was affected heavily because of my area of work in prisons. There was a ban on the main program of prison visits. Our prisons depend on donations from well-wishers and organisations like Female Prisoners Support Trust. While a presidential amnesty was declared and more than 500 women benefitted from the exercise, it was an untimely exercise because no consultations were made with stakeholders leaving us with a massive challenge in tracking these ex-inmates. Livelihoods were lost, lives were lost, and we continue to lose more. Our economy in Zimbabwe is informal and has been hard-hit by closures and demolition of work places with the government failing to offer alternative solutions to the problem.

As I reflect on events since the beginning of the pandemic, I see how all systems broke down and citizens' rights were violated. The right to credible information on what is going on in prison, especially gaining access to statistics on COVID-19, is shrouded in secrecy. Being a WHRD, the moment I tried to share that information on social media I was attacked and my views were regarded as foreign and intended to tarnish the image of the government. There have been a lot of unwarranted arrest of women at police roadblocks for contravening lockdown rules. I also had challenges in reporting into the police station as part of my bail conditions after an arbitrary arrest in 2019. As a WHRD, I am always afraid of being arrested again for failure to report to the police station.

The situation on the ground is uncertain and volatile. There are so many restrictions on movement of people thereby causing families to be in conflict always. There has been a lot of violence against women and girls. More than ten women so far have been arrested for gender-based violence offences and it is difficult to get access to them, either in court or prison. I was in court on June 4th for my own routine remand and what I observed was violation of my health rights. Seven of us accused of trying to subvert a constitutional government were behind the dock and no COVID-19 guidelines were followed. There was no social distancing in the courtroom for offenders. This kind of treatment of arrested persons actually exacerbates the spread of COVID-19. The enforcement agents are just interested in arresting people without observing the WHO guidelines and as per UNODC treatment of prisoners.

I am currently working on documenting stories from inmates.





**Women's
participation in
decision-making
processes during
COVID-19**

MOZAMBIQUE: WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY DURING COVID-19

SAFE SPACES FOR JOINT REFLECTION

Elvira Domingos,

Associação Rede de Raparigas Em Acção (Girls in Action Network Association), Mozambique



Women and girls have faced many challenges during the pandemic. One of the major challenges I experienced in the area of women at this time at COVID-19 is access to water, one of the biggest problems in my community.

Women already travel great distances to obtain drinking water, that lack of water combined with coronavirus prevention measures of frequent hand washing with soap and water adds another strain. Regarding security, it is a great challenge to talk about the safety of women in times of confinement, since their longest time is spent between four walls next to their rapists.

During this pandemic, I have done a lot of work in my community; as a social activist, we carried out several awareness campaigns on the prevention measures of COVID-19 in some districts of Niassa. As a journalist for community radio, I produced several spots, programs, and reports about the coronavirus, focused on the Impact of the Novel Coronavirus in Communities and in the Life of Women.

The National Reflection panel of Young Women Leaders of Mozambique, The Challenges of Women and Security in Times of Change, was a national reflection on COVID-19 and its impact on women's lives. It also served as a reflection on how the normal resumption of activities after this pandemic since many women have lost their businesses and jobs. It took us to a strong reflection on the armed attacks in the Province of Cabo-Delgado, Northern Mozambique during the pandemic. Mozambican women and girls will be engaged in the cross-cutting inclusion of gender issues in building Peace, Security and Recovery, increasing their role in decision making and involvement in efforts to prevent and resolve national insecurity and emergency scenarios. Mozambican

women at the national level have influenced public and private approaches to combat COVID-19 and women too are at the forefront in promoting solidarity campaigns for the victims of armed attacks in the province of Cabo-Delgado, Northern Mozambique. The voice of Mozambican women is also raised in leading safe and comprehensive discussions on COVID-19 and other topics, from which discussions we have received several complaints about sexual violence against girls. A network of young women leaders monitors these and works to assist and respond.

It was very good for me to be working and giving women giving the opportunity to speak, to speak about their problems and fears about the impacts of this pandemic on women's lives. Women who have suffered aggression by the police because they are carrying out trade activities on the streets in full social confinement, women who today are able to share their stories of overcoming domestic violence and other forms of violence that they have suffered, women who lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic due to redundancies in sectors such as hotels and restaurants .

In my work I was deeply affected because I felt psychological pressures in relation to COVID-19, taking into account that it is a disease that affected thousands of people in such a short time. I personally feared coming into contact with people who were not friends, colleagues, and family, but my work itself forced me to talk to other people in the community who were unknown to me. My commitment was renewed by realizing the responsibilities that I have within the Girls Network in my province and being on-air, on radio, informing people about COVID-19 and other matters of public interest.

As a feminist I felt I needed to be on the front lines to support women to fight COVID-19 because of the responsibilities that women have always had at home and in the community.

SOUTH SUDAN: WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN SOUTH SUDAN

CHALLENGES IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

Rachel Adau Gieu,

Executive Director, Women Empowerment Centre South Sudan (WECSS), South Sudan

Women in South Sudan have faced different challenges during COVID-19:

- Gender Based violence due to COVID-19: economic stresses on families have put girls and women at greater risk of exploitation, child labour and high crime rates have increased due to stay at home measures with abusive husbands insulting and intimidating their spouses as well as inflicting bodily harm.
- Access to health services is worsening: the already limited access of many girls and young women to reproductive health services as well as maternal, new-born, and child health services has been further reduced. Hygiene conditions and access are also very poor so adolescent women and girls have no access to dignity kits and hand washing facilities.
- Economic Survival: economic challenges during COVID-19 outbreak pose serious threats to young women's work and livelihoods, increasing their risk of exploitation and abuse. The majority live below the poverty line and they often subsist on daily labour.
- Child marriage and forced marriages: As the education, system is closed due to COVID-19 many high school girls are getting married, an indication that we shall soon have many uneducated mothers contributing further to increased gender inequality. The murder of girls due to poverty-fuelled dowry demands and disputes over forced marriages is increasing on a daily basis.

- Growing injustice for women: there is imperfect access to justice institutions for women amidst COVID-19, and the discriminatory practices of laws are some of the major risks to women's lives.

I founded the Women's Rights Organisation Network to discuss women's affairs and to promote gender equality, end violence against women, and empower women. WECSS is currently leading women's rights organizations in championing creating safe space for women, adolescent girls, and youth in the local and national affairs. In Bor, WECSS is leading discussions for women and adolescent girls in campaigns for 35% representation in the upcoming formation of state governments, leading women and adolescent girls in the construction of the Jonglei Dyke, and leading women and adolescent girls in the provision of the services to the wounded youth currently in the Jonglei state hospital.

During a national conference conducted in March in Juba, supported by Non Violent Peace Force (NP), during our meeting with the EU, we demanded women be appointed as governors and now we have a woman governor in western Barh el Gazal. We have also been advocating for action against early and forced marriage, girl-child education advocacy, menstruation hygiene management, and training of survivors on available services on CRSV and SGBV.

It is to be noted that women and girls are culturally regarded as second-class citizens in our society, only important as sources of wealth and reproduction. Even amidst a constitutional guarantee of 35% representation at all government levels, and with years of exposure and with a humanitarian push for gender equality, cultural barriers and beliefs remain solid. Traditional South Sudanese women and girls are shy and many cannot times speak in public or openly express their desires or wishes.

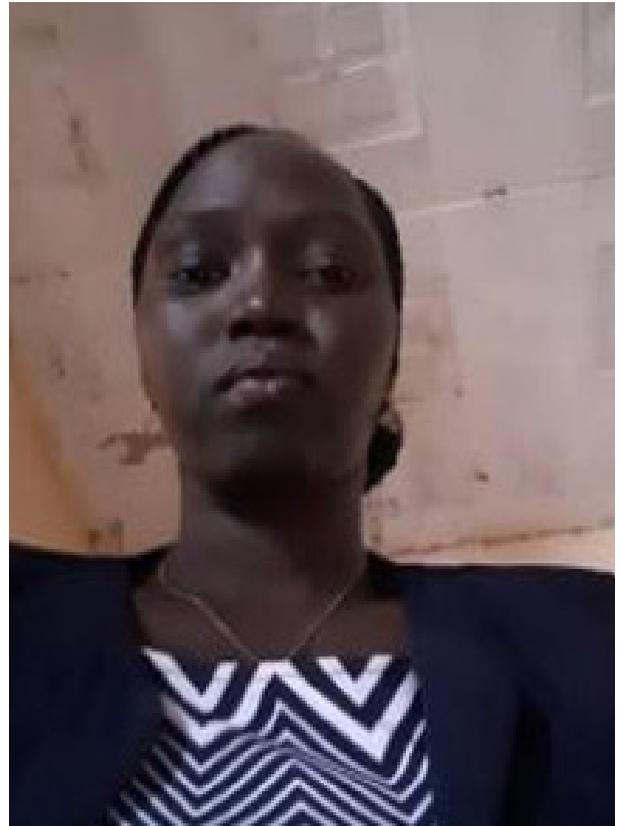
They have often been denied their rights, including the right of making informed choices about their welfare and future lives.

However, though I always try to speak for the voiceless there are many challenges making me feel as if I am not having much impact and succeeding in protecting women from violence against women.

Though not limited to these, some main challenges include:

Lack of funds to women right organisation to support in-need women and adolescent girls, such as dignity kits, psychosocial support, reproductive health services, mentorship programmes, promoting girls child education, establishment of a centre for civil education, promotion of gender equality, empowerment, peace and human right advocacy, documentation and follow up with survivors on CRSV and SGBV.

Leadership and governance; the participation of women in leadership and governance is limited because of high illiteracy rates among women and adolescent girls. As women are seen primarily as a source of wealth they are not educated leading to a lack of involvement in decision-making. Women and girls lack role models, there is a pressing need for civil education to empower them and raise their self-esteem.



ZIMBABWE: BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND WIDENING DISCOURSES

WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN ZIMBABWE

Lainah Ndiweni,

Legal Researcher, Veritas Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe

The COVID pandemic represents a global challenge that affects our lives and our work as Women Human Rights Defenders. As a result, marginalised communities and vulnerable groups such as women and girls bear a differentiated and disproportionate burden. The COVID-19 pandemic poses severe gender-centred threats to women.

Communication for development in human rights is very important and critical in defending human rights. The ability to circulate information about women human rights while upholding social distancing is a challenge to many people especially in a developing country like Zimbabwe whereby there is necessity to acclimatize to the innovative online new normal which had been practically non-existent in the field of women rights defenders. Many women find the unaffordable cost of data restricts access to the internet. Some women in rural areas do not even have the resources to live in a digital world because of the simple fact that they cannot afford to access information because an oxymoron because of the inability to do such.

Many women are used to the community strategy of human rights, which are founded on field visits based on physical one on one interaction. As it is, many women are still in the dark about the existence of women rights defenders platforms and work since the start of the lockdown, because of the unavailability of resources as well as the inability to enter the digital world. Since March 24th, there have been no information, policies or any support mechanisms put into place to engage women digitally, and as such defending women rights becomes an even greater challenge.

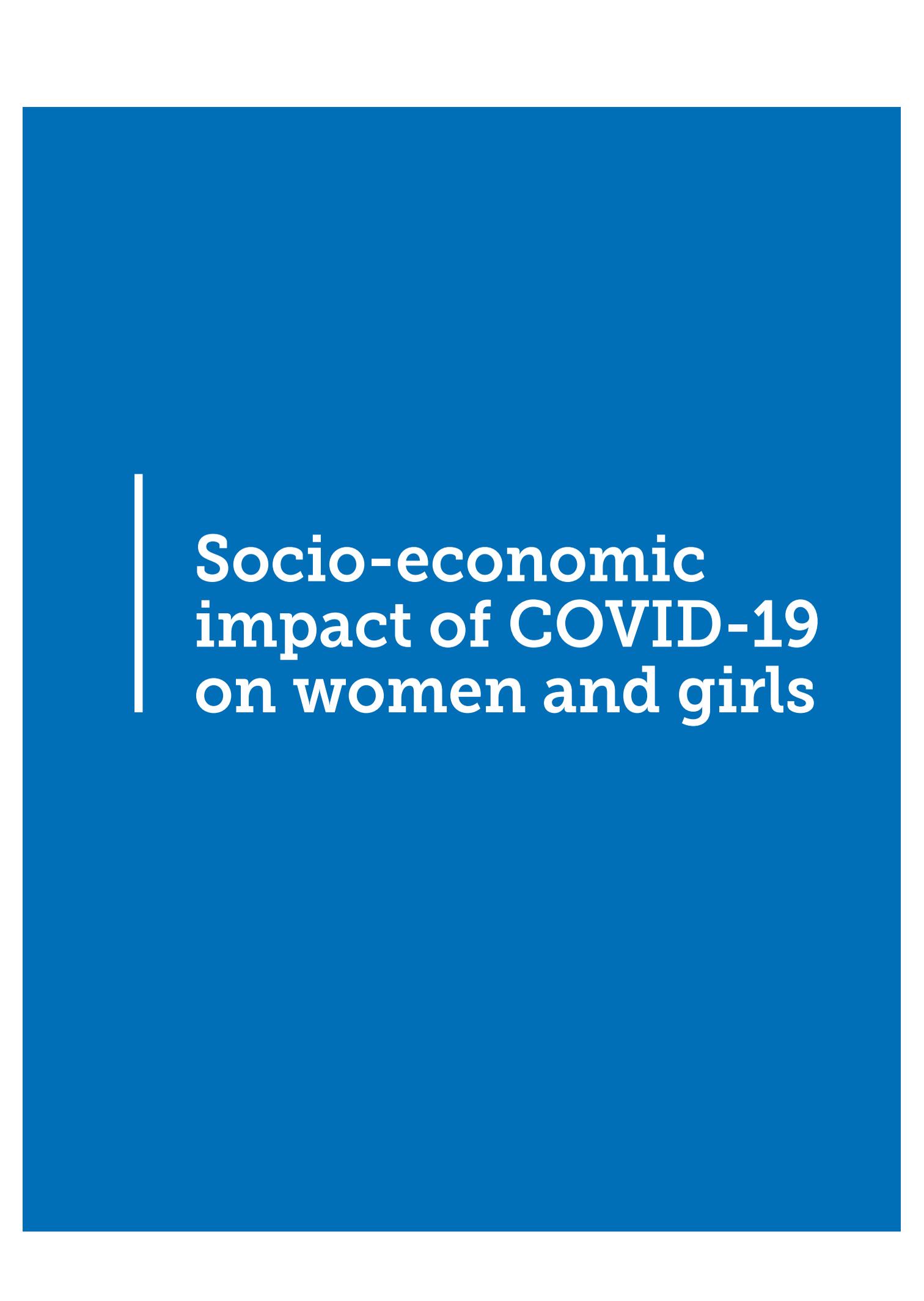
The human rights situation in Zimbabwe remains flawed by numerous conflicts in the human rights paradigm, largely halting from a perpetual culture of elite normal human rights under the rule



of law. Whilst political parties are vital actors, communities are of the analysis that there is a need to widen the human rights discourse to include other societal actors, such as civil society, churches, and business. It should be inclusive to socially marginalised women and women living with disabilities.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as far as defending women's human rights is deep and disproportionate, especially in developing countries like Zimbabwe. In such times, as a woman right defender at Veritas, bringing voices to women through online platforms is a challenge because of the need to address the inequalities in access to information and finding how to bridge the digital divide which further expands the shrinking space in defending human rights in Zimbabwe.

In these unprecedented times as a WHRD in Zimbabwe, we have managed to designate women shelters as essential services. In this way, through women's shelters there is accommodation and integration of accessibility to all, also maintaining the need for physical interaction to which people, particularly elders, are accustomed. As WHRDs, we continue to bear the brunt of harassment both online and offline. Considering that in Zimbabwe there is a massive human rights crisis and political instability, under such an environment it is very crucial for us WHRDs to ensure full participation of all women including those in rural communities, marginalised women, those living with disabilities, those living under the poverty datum line so that we can be the change we want to see in the human rights paradigm.



**Socio-economic
impact of COVID-19
on women and girls**

ETHIOPIA: ADVOCATING FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS DURING COVID-19

Abiy Wendifraw,

Communications Officer, Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA).

In the first week of May 2020, the management of the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA) asked some of its program staff to come in for a meeting. Saba GebreMedhin, NEWA's Executive Directress, asked the staff for a briefing on what impacts of COVID-19 on women had been witnessed. A wide range of economic and social issues were flagged including access to basic services in their communities.

The Communications Officer shared his experience with a girl he'd met the previous week. The girl, estimated to be in her early twenties, claimed to be a waitress who had recently lost her job as a result of the pandemic.

"While I was waiting for a friend in an empty café, this young girl approached me and said 'My brother, I am sorry for interrupting you. Can I share your table?' As she started to speak more, I could see the tears in her eyes. She said, 'I want to eat something.' She later told me that, lacking her income from tips, she was struggling to cover her expenses and lacked savings as almost all of her salary had been used to cover her rent."

Other staff mentioned that there were indicators that domestic abuse and gender-based violence might be on the rise. There were also reports in local media that more women were choosing to give birth at home due to their fears of contracting the virus if they went to a health centre.

As an immediate action, NEWA managed to shift a considerable amount of its budget towards responses to COVID-19. Through its Women Voice Leader program, NEWA, in partnership with Plan

International Ethiopia, supported women-headed households in two sub-cities in the capital Addis Ababa. NEWA staff also travelled to the city of Adama in the Oromia regional state to support 100 women-headed households.

To assess the extent of the problem, the NEWA team conceived of organizing a webinar under the theme "Gender & COVID-19", bringing various industry actors together to enable them all to share their findings from both rapid and long-term assessments. Though NEWA's original concept for the virtual meeting had simply been to provide an initial exploration of the impact of the pandemic, it quickly became a popular platform for CSOs working on advancing gender equality and protecting the human rights of girls and women. The platform also attracted experts, from the Attorney-General's office, and other government ministries, who listened to problems and issues that required governmental intervention.

In mid-June, NEWA, along with its partners – stakeholders and a range of local and international Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) - organized a press conference on the topic "Gender & COVID-19." The group issued a joint statement calling on the government of Ethiopia, UN agencies, development partners, CSOs, and others to address the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls in Ethiopia.

Following these advocacy-based activities, we witnessed the government taking special actions on stimulus packages for employees in the most affected industries that also employ the majority of the female labour force.





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