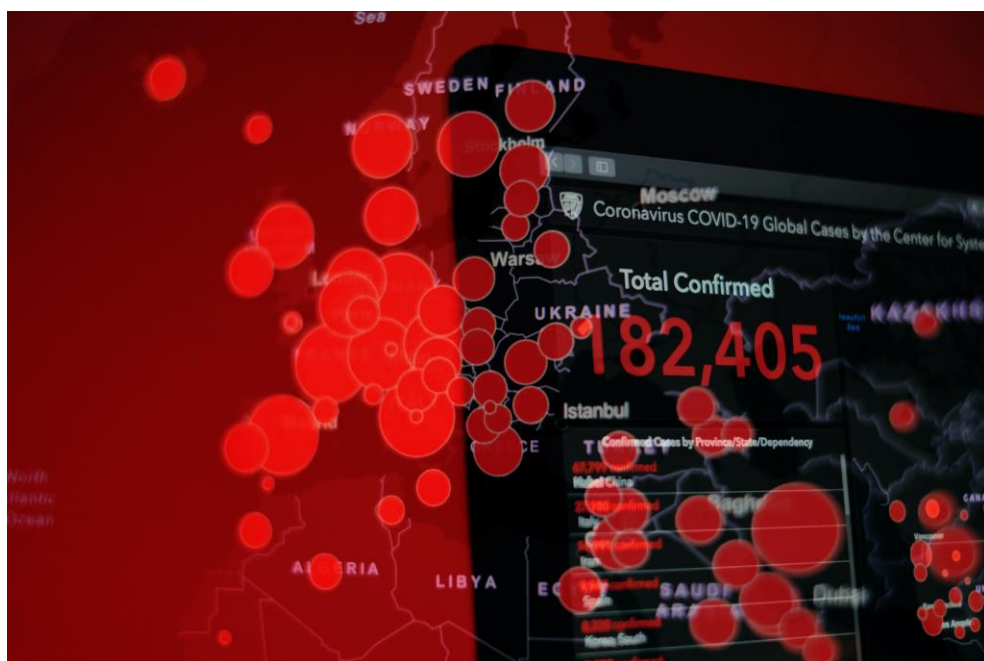


THE URGENT NEED TO ADDRESS THE GENDERED IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN WEST AFRICAN COMMONWEALTH COUNTRIES



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief presents emerging evidence on the gendered impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and girls in the Anglophone region of West Africa. Highlighted are the trends and issues of Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) occurring because of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures imposed to curb its spread. Based on existential issues on access to justice, economic wellbeing, and inclusion in decision-making and policies for women and girls in the sub-region, this brief moves to advocate for governance responses and measures to curb existing inequalities and harmful social norms that discriminate against women and girls, and are exacerbated in the face of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It proffers recommendations to be considered by all stakeholders, from the government, private sector, civil society, and international organizations for social inclusiveness in emergency plans. Furthermore, recent data on incidences of VAWG in the countries under review (Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Cameroon) were presented to shape the course of responsive action that is needed to protect women and girls in an emergency setting.



INTRODUCTION

Emerging evidence on incidences of Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) from five countries of the Anglophone region of West Africa indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic and measures imposed to curb its spread have contributed to an alarming rise in levels of Violence against Women and Girls.

Despite experiences from past emergencies, the frameworks and policies needed to deliver robust gender-sensitive strategies to understand and address the differentiated impacts of emergencies like COVID 19 on vulnerable populations have been absent. This vacuum has led to an increase in incidences of Gender-based violence (GBV), as it became more difficult for survivors to access help, resources, and justice.

The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities that result from social norms and societal attitudes and structures that discriminate against women and girls, leading to a rise in gender-based violence, and it has further exposed structural weaknesses in governance measures to tackle gender-based violence and the health, social and economic needs of women and girls. Although the impact of the pandemic varies across the countries under review, its current and long-term adverse effects on pre-existing gender and other intersecting inequalities affecting women and girls are a constant factor across all countries in this brief.

In light of the unprecedented nature and scale of Covid-19 across the sub-region, this brief advocates for:

- Increased sensitisation towards attitudinal change to end VAWG and uphold equal human rights for all.
- Effective and well-coordinated multi-sectorial response structures and mechanisms to adequately support survivors of violence.
- Gender analysis and sex-disaggregated data collection to urgently address the gendered impacts of COVID -19.
- Strengthened mechanisms to improve access to justice with adequate budgetary allocations for the provision of GBV response services.

Unless governments and relevant agencies in the region take urgent steps to strengthen governance responses to mitigate women's rights violations worsened by gender blind Covid-19 responses, the shared aspirations and progress made over the years to end VAWG across the Commonwealth and globally are in danger of being reversed by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.



The negative impact of gender-blind governance responses to COVID-19 on the rights of women and girls

Rising levels of Violence against Women and Girls

In times of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, women and girls are at increased risk of Gender-Based Violence¹ as crises tend to exacerbate existing inequalities if corresponding policy responses are not based on a careful analysis of their differentiated impact on populations.

Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) is a public health concern and human rights issue, affecting millions of women and girls globally. It is defined as “*any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.*”² It is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination and discrimination against women and girls.

There is evidence that the pandemic has fueled an exponential increase in VAWG across multiple countries.³ This was further exacerbated by efforts to curb the spread of the pandemic such as national lockdowns, leading to disruptions in school schedules, routine health services and protective structures such as shelters, judicial systems, and community-level leisure centres, making it difficult for women and girls to avoid abuse and access or receive appropriate and coordinated services.

Nigeria witnessed an estimated 60% increase in domestic violence cases, a 30% increase in sexual violence, and a 10% increase in child abuse during the lockdown⁴, as lockdown restrictions meant children had to stay home from school, in some cases confining adolescent girls and young women in the same spaces as their abusers. At least 80 cases of incestuous rape were reported in Anambra State in Nigeria during the 6-week lockdown period, with most of the perpetrators being a close relative.⁵ The exponential rise in reported rape cases during the first months of COVID 19 led the Nigerian Government to declare a state of emergency on rape and sexual abuse in the country, particularly as several cases among adolescent girls and young women were lethal.⁶ Movement

¹ The World Bank Inter-Agency Standing Committee defined GBV as ‘an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between males and females; see World Bank Brief: “Gender-Based Violence (Violence Against Women and Girls)” [2019] <https://www.worldbank.org>; World Health Organization Report: Global Status Report on Violence

Prevention 2014 <https://www.who.int/violenceinjuryprevention/violence/status_report/2014/en/> Accessed 18/01/2020.

² <https://www.who.int/gender/violence/v4.pdf> Accessed 19/01/2020

³ Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. "Gender-based violence in the COVID-19 pandemic." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 21 April 2020. <www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/04/200420145023.htm>.

⁴ Umukoro, E., ‘Amidst COVID-19 Lockdown, Nigeria sees Increased Sexual and Gender Violence’ June 1, Premium Times, 2020.

⁵ National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP); cited in Ezeh, F. ‘Anambra Recorded 80 Cases of Father-daughter rape during the lockdown, says NAPTIP’ The Sun newspaper, 10th June 2020

<<https://www.sunnewsonline.com/anambra-recorded-80-cases-of-father-daughter-rape-during-lockdown-says-naptip/>> Accessed 19/01/2020

⁶ <https://globalvoices.org/2020/07/03/nigeria-declares-state-of-emergency-on-rape-and-sexual-assault/>



restrictions in Nigeria also increased incidences of extortion and sexual harassment of women and girls by security agents.⁷

Cases of incest, sexual violations, and defilement of girls due to lockdown measures have also been reported from Sierra Leone, Ghana, Cameroon, Gambia, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, and Guinea.

The Gambian Network against Gender-Based Violence (NGBV) recorded 1068 cases of sexual violence across nine “*One-Stop Centres*” in 2020, an exponential increase compared to 2,000 cases of SGBV collated nationally over four years from 2015 to 2019.⁸ In Ghana, the number of cases of various forms of VAWG even rose after the lockdown ended, suggesting a continuing lack of effort by the government to address VAWG.⁹

The economic instability and loss of livelihoods resulting from the pandemic have placed young girls at the risk of early marriage, adolescent pregnancy, complicated deliveries, obstetric emergencies, unsafe abortions, sexually transmitted infections, human immune virus (HIV), and vesico-vaginal fistulas. It has also led to anxiety, frustration and anger among men who have not been able to fulfill their ascribed breadwinner roles in the Gambia, increasing the risk of GBV, as some have resorted to violence to exert power and authority.¹⁰ Strains in relationships and increased physical and mental aggression towards women and girls have also been reported from Cameroon due to similar frustrations resulting from COVID-19 prevention measures.¹¹

This upsurge in levels of gender-based violence across the region since the outbreak of COVID-19 has been confirmed by regional multilateral organizations such as the Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS) and a regional INGO called the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding WANEP.¹²

The societal roles that discriminate against women and girls were further reinforced during the pandemic, as they had to stay at home due to increased care responsibilities for children homeschooled, sick relatives, or closure of schools making it hard for them to participate and voice

⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/9/9/women-abused-by-police-enforcing-covid-19-rules-in-nigeria>

⁸ How COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates sexual based violence in the Gambia <https://www.chronicle.gm/how-covid-19-pandemic-exacerbates-sexual-based-violence-in-the-gambia/>

⁹ Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit of the Ghana Police Service <http://www.businessghana.com/site/news/general/238003/Domestic-violence-cases-reduce-in-2020->

¹⁰ UNFPA, “The Parallel Pandemic: Domestic and Gender-Based Violence During COVID-19 in the Gambia [2020], The Gambia Gender Unit <<https://www.gambia.unfpa.org>>

¹¹ Cameroon Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and State-building (CSPPS) on an Association Rayons de Soleil survey conducted revealed that 60% of its 200 respondents experienced increased strain in their relationship with their partner.

¹² ECOWAS COMMISSION: “ECOWAS Commission Calls for Urgent Action to Address Sexual and Gender based Violence” [2020] <<http://www.ecowas.int/ecowas-calls-for-urgent-action-to-address-sexual-gender-based-violence-and-protect-the-rights-of-women-and-girls/>> Accessed 19/01/2020.; WANEP Thematic Report: ‘The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Women: Lessons from the Ebola Outbreak in West Africa’ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Thematic_Report_Final_-_The_impact_of_COVID-19_on_Women_in_West_Africa.pdf

their concerns in decision-making spaces where pandemic preparedness and responses were discussed.

Ministries, governments and agencies of Women's Affairs, Budget and National Planning, Emergency Management, Education, Youth, and Social Development in the region must

- Raise awareness on GBV preventive and response services for women and girls, particularly during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 outbreak. This can be achieved via a variety of media channels, including print materials (translated in local dialects), existing community radio programs, TV advertisements and text messaging services utilized to transmit messages to members of the public. This will significantly contribute towards breaking the culture of silence and negative attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate violence against women and girls.
- Institute robust policies and implementation strategies for preparedness, prevention, and response, with adequate budgetary allocations to ensure gender responsiveness during times of crisis. These should be based on gender analysis, audits, research, data collection, and gender mainstreaming.
- Develop a standardized and synchronized GBV data collection and management system in the region to enable organizations and service providers to monitor and adequately document information about all cases that are reported, including referrals made and completed, disaggregated by age and sex. Evidence collated will guide decisions and policies on preventing and responding to SGBV for a gender-equitable world.
- Mobilize resources to support the full inclusion and participation of women and girls in the community and state-level decision-making and intervention initiatives on preventing and responding to SGBV through updated guidelines for integrating gender sensitivity into emergency responses, including ethically sound processes for gender analysis that covers gendered roles, risks, social norms, capabilities and needs of vulnerable women and girls. The inclusion of women will be a step towards ensuring that the unique needs of women and girls are expressed in all COVID-19 crisis response activities, including GBV prevention and response efforts

[The Already Limited Infrastructure Providing Vital Reproductive Health and GBV Services Worsened as A Result Of The Pandemic.](#)

The pandemic and its political restrictions have worsened access to the already weak public health infrastructure in most of the countries under review. As governments do not classify GBV response services or maternal and reproductive healthcare as essential services, survivors of SGBV had limited access to health care because of the closure of health centers, strict movement restrictions and fear of contracting the virus from health facilities.



Across the region, there are limited emergency shelters or safe houses for survivors fleeing abusive homes, meaning that there is inadequate support to assist women and girls with sheltering services in the event they want to leave their abusers. For some survivors, the absence of such places where their children at least can be relocated often causes them to live with their abusers. A survey by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) highlights that in Cameroon, although 62% of respondents noticed changes in GBV trends since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, victims had no options for safe shelter to recover from the trauma of violence and had limited access to health services.¹³

For adequate emergency preparedness and response and to strengthen the already weak infrastructure there is, therefore, an urgent need for a coordinated and collaborative effort of the Ministries of Women and Gender Affairs, Ministries of Justice and Human Rights institutions, to prioritise GBV response, acknowledging the importance of sexual health and reproductive rights.

Resources should be allocated to equip “one-stop” shelters and crisis centres (such as sexual assault and referral centres) for women and girls who experience violence. The centres should be established across multiple hot spot locations across regions, providing quality and comprehensive access to legal, health, psycho-social and other referral services to promote physical/psychological healing, protection and access to justice for survivors. The establishment of shelters (for both short- and long-term stay) will provide a safe haven for women and girls who flee homes to escape GBV. The centres should be equipped with facilities that will aid rehabilitation and empower women and girls who experienced violence to become change ambassadors and be better equipped to live a productive life.

In the context of COVID 19 and resultant measures to curb its spread, disruptions in routine services and physical meetings have highlighted the importance of seeking alternative methods to identify and respond to women and girls experiencing violence. Particularly in the digital age, responding to violence against women and girls calls for the use of innovative technology such as toll-free hotlines that survivors can contact if they require post violence care. Relevant government agencies and stakeholders should be prepared to offer virtual support responding to VAWG. These services must be equipped with innovative platforms, such as mobile applications, that improve access to quality services, as well as methods of tracking GBV cases and information, utilizing geospatial coordinates, among others.

[Access to Justice Increasingly Denied Due to Lockdowns and Reallocation of Resources from Vital Services Towards COVID 19 Responses.](#)

The already limited services that support justice for women and girls who experience violence were weakened by the adopted pandemic policy response. Data obtained from the Rainbow Initiative and the Call Centre established and operated by the Ministry of Gender and Children’s

¹³ UNFPA, Central Africa: Impact of COVID-19 On Gender-Based Violence in West and Central Africa
<https://allafrica.com/stories/202007100442.html>”



Affairs in Sierra Leone shows that a large percentage of GBV reported cases remained unaddressed due to a lack of legal representation and unavailability of virtual court hearings during the lockdown. In Sierra Leone, an estimated 2,978 cases of sexual and physical assaults were reported between April and October 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic left the justice system handicapped and unable to dispense its functions and roles across the sub-region. Resources meant to address access to justice and other forms of legal redress for survivors became difficult, as police officers in gender units were mobilized to other units to support the enforcement of lockdowns, and this led to gaps in GBV response. Also, many court proceedings were suspended or postponed, and accused persons not taken into custody to curb the spread of the virus. The apparent lack of court sittings limited the ability to issue protection and restraining orders that would otherwise have immediate impacts on the survivor's protection.

The disconnect between legal frameworks, policies, and implementation is evident in the increasing number of cases without a corresponding prosecution and trial of offenders, coupled with the slow pace of justice delivery, preventive, and response services to GBV survivors.

Ministries of Gender, Budget and National Planning, Finance, Women' Affairs, Humanitarian Affairs, and Legislative bodies should ensure that:

- Preparedness and response to future crises and pandemics are based on robust gender-responsive policy frameworks and implementation strategies (including research, data collection, gender analysis, audit, and gender mainstreaming) that guarantee an adequate response to survivors of violence. These should be supported by adequate budgetary allocations, particularly during times of crisis, and no resources for these vital and essential services should be reallocated to dealing with the epidemic.
- The Police, Ministries of Justice, and Public Defenders should ensure prompt prosecution of offenders through a multi-sectorial response mechanism at times of emergencies such as during the COVID-19 crisis. This will serve as a deterrent to other intending violators of women and children.
- The AU Framework Document on Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment and the UN Guidance note on CEDAW and COVID-19 are instructive. Also, legislators in the sub-region must move to pass domesticated legislations to aid the protection of women and girls against all forms of violence. Civil society organizations, ministries of justice and development partners should scale up advocacy for the immediate domestication of all regional laws that protect human rights.



Access to Economic Resources for Women and Other Vulnerable Groups Was Further Limited Due to A Lack of Gender-Sensitive Economic Policy Responses.

Across the West African sub-region, there was minimal to no response by most Governments to cushion the effects of the Covid19 pandemic compared to other countries of the global north where economic stimulus and social protection packages were distributed to their most vulnerable populations. Even when distributed in the region, it happened without any form of gender consideration, making it impossible for most women and girls to directly benefit.¹⁴

The pandemic has resulted in female businesses plummeting, pay and job cuts, and other attendant hardships. Most women, working in the informal sector, earning a daily living, had little or no income during the lockdown¹⁵. In addition to dealing with reduced incomes and increased caring responsibilities, many women faced an increased burden to provide, particularly when income earning family members fell ill or lost their job. Particularly vulnerable groups of women and girls had to resort to transactional sex and prostitution to feed and meet basic needs.¹⁶

While unemployment, underemployment and loss of livelihood can affect all people, they particularly affected women due to their gender roles, the type of work they do, stereotypes and inequality in policies and systems that limit their participation and productivity in the formal sector. Women in the sub-region consistently earn less than men, have higher economic insecurity, and are less able to build up savings that can take them through times of emergencies.

Governments should:

- Develop gendered frameworks that will assist women and girls and other populations in the margins experiencing food insecurity and loss of income to surmount economic vulnerabilities exacerbated during times of crisis.
- Establish clear preparedness and response plans on livelihood interventions to current and future socio-economic impacts, with adequate budgetary allocations aimed at quickening the economic recovery of women and girls.
- Strengthen hard-hit sectors that employ large sections of women, and create emergency funds for marginalized groups, including domestic workers, women with disabilities and GBV survivors, as part of prevention and recovery plans.

¹⁴ Madden, P. (2020, September 16). *Figure of the week: Challenges facing economic stimulus in sub-Saharan Africa*. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/09/16>. Assessed 19/01/2021

¹⁵ UN Women, 'COVID 19 and its economic toll on women: the story behind the numbers', <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/9/feature-covid-19-economic-impacts-on-women>

¹⁶ In Cameroon particularly displaced women and girls who are a particularly vulnerable group, were forced into prostitution <https://gnwp.org/wp-content/uploads/Cameroon-COVID-19-Profile.pdf>

³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/9/9/women-abused-by-police-enforcing-covid-19-rules-in-nigeria>



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