UN WOMEN

# Policy Brief

## THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

**UN Women West and Central Africa Regional Office**

# COMBINING THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19 AND THE FIGHT FOR PEACE

The whole world is facing an unprecedented health crisis linked to COVID-19. First identified in China, the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus spread around the world in a few months, which led the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare the epidemic a pandemic on March 11, 2020. The countries of West and Central Africa registered the first cases of COVID-19 from March 2020.

This pandemic occurred in an already difficult context in most of the countries, some of which are in difficult security, political and economic situations due to armed conflict. Since COVID-19 is a new disease for which no vaccine or cure is known to date, the initial response focuses on preventing its spread through containment, hygiene and social distancing. Unfortunately, these measures are difficult to apply in the context of poverty, conflict, and weak social protection systems.

While most of the analyses made so far are devoted to the economic impact of the pandemic, it is nevertheless necessary to reflect also on the impact of the pandemic on peace and the future of the security situation both during the crisis and the post crisis period. The purpose of this note is thus to make proposals which constitute avenues for reflection which will allow the various actors to proactively adopt approaches sensitive to gender and conflict and making it possible to combine the fight against COVID-19 and the fight for peace.

# SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 IN THE WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA REGION

Peace and security issues were already acute, and the risk is that the combination of the multiple effects of COVID-19 would further worsen this situation. Predictable conflict factors could be articulated around 3 categories:

➤ **Conflicts already existing in the region:** the region is facing enormous security challenges which are aggravated by political, geopolitical, socio-economic and environmental factors. Many countries, especially in the Sahel region, face terrorist threats and violent extremism, inter-community conflicts. Unfortunately, these factors will persist even after the crisis and there is a high probability that they will get worse and further amplifying socio-economic pressures on deemed vulnerable local communities. The Secretary-General of the United Nations has called for a ceasefire during this period of global crisis, but unfortunately, terrorist and inter-community attacks continue in some countries.

➤ **Social tension and insecurity linked to the crisis management:** for the purpose of coping with the pandemic, countries were compelled to take binding measures of social distancing and containment. There is an implicit risk in the use of security forces that could lead to human rights abuses and therefore aggravate the crisis. In addition, poverty and hunger resulting from these measures could also cause revolts and social tensions. Other tensions could arise from disruption in the food aid distribution systems.  Similarly, poverty and unemployment could directly contribute to the increase of crime in cities and other affected regions.

➤ **Factors of conflicts and insecurities in the post-pandemic phase:** when asked about the security situation after this pandemic, the most likely hypothesis is that the security context will be more complex if preventive measures are not quickly adopted in crisis management. The aftermath of the tensions linked to the crisis management, exacerbated by the foreseen financial and economic crisis, electoral crisis in some countries... would be additional factors to existing conflicts in the region as described above.

# WOMEN AT THE CENTER OF A GENDER SENSITIVE COVID-19 AND CONFLICT RESPONSE

This context of crisis due to COVID-19 occurs in a region where women were already subject to several forms of violence and discrimination of legal, political, economic and social nature, underpinned by socio-cultural beliefs and barriers deeply rooted into tradition. That vulnerability caused by the multifaceted discrimination against women indicates that women will be disproportionately affected by the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 and the conflicts that may arise.

The marginalization of women in the search for responses is visible in some countries where they are not or underrepresented in decision-making bodies in connection with COVID-19. And yet, they possess enormous potential and could have more impact in the pandemic management if they get substantial support. Women contribution has already been proven during other pandemics including Ebola in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone and the same scheme could be applied in the context of the fight against COVID-19 and the post crisis period.

Given this context, the leadership of women leaders in the region must be at the heart of conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives, as stipulated by Resolution 1325 (2000) and its related resolutions. Women must be at the forefront of promoting peaceful responses to COVID-19 through continuous early warning and conflict prevention. The role of women in conflict prevention is defined in the various instruments and standards of the women, peace and security agenda and in the national actions plans for the implementation of Resolution 1325 of the United Nations Security Council.

Unfortunately the tendency is so often to relegate gender issues to second class during high tension situation or emergency as it is case with the COVID-19 crisis. Women cannot and must not be only passive recipients of humanitarian aid but rather actors who contribute to the search for solutions to all the protection, prevention and recovery measures taken by States and international organizations.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Effective responses to COVID-19 will necessarily involve parallel management of a health crisis, economic crisis and security crisis, not hierarchical management or leaving aside one of these components. Considering gender and peace as crosscutting themes to all responses turns out to be essential. The following recommendations are therefore formulated for peaceful and gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19:

① **Take gender into account in the mechanisms for coordinating the response to COVID-19:**

- it will be important that the institutions in charge of gender and the representatives of women's organizations be members of the various COVID-19 response coordinating mechanisms and at all levels
- it will be important that the national response plans to COVID-19 and the programs of the various actors integrate the gender dimension in a transversal way and also provide specific responses for women
- Women must be involved in the aid need assessment, distribution, monitoring, and evaluation

② **Strengthen the role of the defense and security forces and the judicial actors for the prevention of violence against women and girls** both in public space, during the distribution of aid, demonstrations, and the implementation of containment measures and violence committed in private space

③ **Support women's organizations to play a key role in early warning** against all factors that could lead to conflict and social tension during this crisis period, and in the recovery phase.

④ Strengthen the advocacy capacity of women's peace organizations in order to **lead cease-fire campaigns targeting various conflicts existing actors** in the region in accordance with the call launched by the Secretary General of the United Nations

**⑤ Adjust the national action plans for the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325** to the context of COVID-19 and call to States and various partners to continue supporting their effective implementation

**⑥ Continue providing humanitarian assistance to displaced populations** due to conflict in the region while intensifying pandemic prevention measures at the sites and ensuring access of women and girls to reproductive health and protection against violence services

**⑦ Prioritize the implementation of current regional programs and strategies** for peace and security and stabilization even after the COVID-19 crisis and ensure that they further support women's leadership for peace and cohesion in the region.



UN Women Mali