



GUIDANCE NOTE

UN WOMEN EAST AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

WOMEN PEACE AND SECURITY ON COVID-19 RESPONSE





1. BACKGROUND

Majority of the countries within East and Southern Africa region have in the last two decades experienced instability and a myriad of conflicts ranging from politically motivated conflict, the spread of violent extremism and terrorism, competition for natural resources and regional conflicts all against a backdrop of wider social marginalization, poverty, social inequality, high youth unemployment and resource-based tensions. This is further exacerbated by regional instability and spill-over effects from politically unstable countries in the region; Somalia, South Sudan and the Great Lakes Region resulting in displacement and higher numbers of refugees and internally displaced people in refugee camps and urban centres in Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda - of which over 70% of them are women and children. Furthermore, the region suffers from regular and overlapping natural disasters particularly drought, floods, pest infestation (Locust invasion in the Horn of Africa) and epidemics that have significantly impacted livelihoods and economic development.

Crisis, conflict and disasters have profound and disproportionate impacts on women and girls, amplifying pre-existing inequalities. These range from restriction to access to basic services, heightened vulnerability to Gender-Based Violence, including physical insecurity, displacement, loss of livelihoods, food insecurity and exclusion from meaningfully participating

in decision making processes. With the current situation with COVID-19, these vulnerabilities risk to be further exacerbated. COVID-19 can act as a driver of conflict and inflame social instability, fuel distrust and misinformation and amplify pre-existing inequalities from high protection risks, limited access to social protection programmes including emergency response plans, human rights violations, increase in transnational and organized crime, trafficking of women, access to health services and increased domestic violence, including sexual extortion, exploitation and abuse. Since the first case was reported in March 2020, according to the Chief Justice of Kenya, sexual offences constituted 35.8 percent of cases recorded since Mid-March and the Ministry of Public Service Youth and Gender Affairs reported a 42 percent increase.

Although Governments in the region continue to adhere to regulations set out by World Health Organization (WHO), the African Centre for Disease Control (African CDC) and national authorities, most governments have taken a securitized approach on handling COVID-19. The introduction of police and military to enforce lockdown, closure of borders, operate checkpoints and restrict movement and communications, all mirror a governance context similar to that of a conflict setting, bringing about disproportionate impact and security risks to women and other vulnerable groups.

COVID-19 further presents a new dimension to conflict environments. There has been a shift in focus from minimizing conflicts, neutralizing terrorism, delaying peacekeeping missions, mediation and diplomatic efforts to concert all resources to “flattening the COVID-19 curve.” There is also potential of increased terror attacks in the region given that extremists are seeing opportunities to exploit and exacerbate tension and uncertainty and mobilize sympathizers/ supporters whilst Government officials are responding to COVID-19. Recently, Somali based group-Al Shabab-issued a communique stating efforts for Jihad should be intensified in the East Africa region during this period. This exposes communities to possibilities of a relapse of conflict with the most vulnerable being women and girls.

It has further been noted that the lockdowns have encouraged digital working and telecommuting thus disrupting referral and protection mechanisms through women’s networks, associations and women’s rights organizations for victims of conflicts and political instability. The shift to online engagement has reduced advocacy space for women’s rights by Civil Society Organizations including delivery of services to women.

Moreover, given the region is home to millions of refugees and displaced persons living in crowded camps with limited sanitation facilities, insecurity, lack of livelihood opportunities and food insecurity, will make isolation and other COVID-19 mitigation measures challenging to implement to avoid the spread of the virus.

In majority of conflict and post-conflict countries, women continue to be marginalized in state building and post conflict recovery planning processes. Women continue to be underrepresented in decision making roles in governance, conflict prevention, peacebuilding and resolution mechanisms. Women in the region have nevertheless played significant roles in advancing peace and security, including in accelerating economic revitalization in the aftermath of disaster/crisis, promoting inclusive recovery and in contributing to sustainable peace, despite the patriarchal systems that continue to prevail. Therefore, there is need for these lessons to be replicated in the COVID-19 response and recovery processes. Their knowledge can inform and improve interventions. Crisis and humanitarian

responses often miss opportunities to transform gender relations through the leadership and empowerment of women in their role as decision makers, first responders and economic actors-notwithstanding that these are key to respond effectively and to build sustainable peace, longer-term resilience and social cohesion of communities.

This is in line with the UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 developed by countries in the region that seek to increase the meaningful participation of women in peace and security and amplify the voices and priorities of women in these processes. Applying the lens of women, peace and security to COVID-19 response and recovery plans and interventions provide valuable guidance on the fundamental need for women’s rights and women’s leadership to be at the forefront of relief and recovery. If women can be meaningfully included in these processes, the challenges of COVID-19 have the potential to be a catalytic moment for bringing about transformative change and sustainable peace in line with the agenda 2030 on sustainable development.



2. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MULTI AND COUNTRY OFFICES TO CONSIDER

- Ensure women's equal representation and meaningful participation in COVID-19 planning, decision making, implementation and recovery stages. This strengthens protection efforts, accelerates economic recovery, deepens social cohesion and conflict prevention efforts.
- Ensure that planning, response and recovery plans/processes are gender responsive and are informed by women's socio-economic rights, needs and priorities - ensure consultation for ownership purposes.
- Advocate for security sector response to COVID-19 including response to curfews are proportionate, gender-sensitive and protect women's human rights-Develop curfew guidelines and adequate female representation of security response teams.
- Enhance capacity of security officials to identify violation of women's rights, such as gender based violence, trafficking, new and evolving crime patterns that affect women and vulnerable groups.
- Women's organizations at the community level should be supported to ensure that messages about sexual violence prevention and response strategies within the COVID-19 context reach all women.
- Integrate the Interagency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in disaster and Humanitarian Action in the country's response to gender based violence and preventing sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Ensure that gender needs assessments and analysis including collection of sex, age, and disability disaggregated data in disasters are conducted.
- Adopt measures that ensure access of migrant women, refugees and displaced women and girls to health services, education and livelihood options to mitigate protection risks with attention to gender-based violence, trafficking of women and girls, and the promotion of social cohesion.
- Support women's focused civil society organizations to monitor and document security-sector action, ceasefires, access to justice, and governance to promote transparency and accountability for women's human rights under national emergency conditions during the COVID-19 period.
- Support efforts by women to promote social cohesion measures including countering discrimination and hate speech, sustaining peace and the prevention of COVID-19 becoming a driver of violence and conflict-including bridging trust between State and communities.
- Develop strategies focused on inclusive recovery to build resilience, and promote mechanisms for income generation and sustainable livelihoods, recognizing the more significant and variable impact of the crisis on different groups of women and vulnerable groups.
- Prioritise the African Union 2020 flagship on "Silencing the Guns; Creating Conducive Conditions for Africa's Development" especially on conflict countries. This is complimented by the call by the UN Secretary General who called on all warring factions in the world to declare a ceasefire.

3. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 crisis is a security threat that calls for utmost mobilization and solidarity among all stakeholders including women, communities, civil society, media, private sector, the UN family, government among others. All stakeholders must combine their energies and resources towards mitigating its effects. At the center of stakeholder efforts is gender responsive women peace and security efforts which should ensure women are active participants and not mere recipients of services and products during the COVID-19 response and recovery.

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AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN.
A GLOBAL CHAMPION FOR WOMEN
AND GIRLS, UN WOMEN WAS
ESTABLISHED TO ACCELERATE
PROGRESS ON MEETING THEIR
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UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to implement these standards. It stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five priority areas: increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes; enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.



East and Southern Africa Regional Office
UN Complex, Gigiri, Block M, Ground Floor
P.O. Box 30218 – 00100
Tel: +254207624365 - Nairobi, Kenya
<http://africa.unwomen.org/en>
esaro.publications@unwomen.org