



Framework Document on the Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment:

African Union Guidelines
on Gender-Responsive Responses
to COVID-19



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Introduction

Gender Equality is enshrined in the African Union (AU) Constitutive Act as a guiding principle according to which the Union shall operate. It is also recognized in all the goals of Agenda 2063 as a cornerstone of the AU's development agenda. The AU continues to prioritize Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) in its various thematic areas of work and provides innovative and progressive solutions to realize this critical development goal in the African Continent. With the COVID-19, an unprecedented global pandemic that has spread to almost all its 55 Member States, the AU is faced with a challenge of this pandemic possibly reversing some of the gains it has made in promoting gender equality, women's empowerment and women's rights. Gender inequalities have the potential to exacerbate the outbreak, and responses that do not incorporate gender analysis may in turn, worsen inequalities.

It is important that the AU considers how COVID-19 will disproportionately affect women including young women and girls, particularly the vulnerable and those living in crises and conflict affected countries and ensure a gendered perspective in the analysis and responses to the pandemic. This will enable the designing and implementation of programmes and strategies, as well as the establishment of monitoring and reporting systems that are appropriate on differential preventive measures. Applying a gendered lens implies, among others, questioning how socially-constructed roles and identities may affect vulnerability to and experiences of COVID-19¹. A gendered lens to COVID-19 responses will improve outcomes for not only women, but all people affected by the virus and contribute to saving lives in Africa.

Consistent with the mandate of the Women, Gender and Development Directorate (WGDD), as the African Union Commission (AUC) entity responsible for promoting the integration of GEWE in the work of the Union, this framework document was

¹ Smith Julia, Gender and the Coronavirus Outbreak, February 4, 2020, [globalhealth.org](https://www.globalhealth.org)

developed to enhance awareness about the impact of COVID-19 on GEWE and to provide Guidelines for gender-responsive interventions to COVID-19 in the Continent. These Guidelines will complement the existing AU responses under the coordination and leadership of the Africa Centres for Disease Prevention and Control (Africa CDC).



Photo: Gettyimages

Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment and Guidelines on Gender-Responsive Responses

The impact of COVID-19 on women is multi-dimensional and therefore, the responses have to be appropriate to meet the differential and multiple ways in which women may be affected. Below is an analysis of the multiple dimensions in which women, including young women and girls, may be disproportionately affected by COVID-19. This will be followed by Guidelines on Gender- Responsive Responses that Member States, in partnership with all relevant stakeholders can apply to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Guidelines are rooted in the following eight enabling principles and success factors:

- 1. Gender mainstreaming and integration:** The AU recognizes GEWE as the cornerstone of its development agenda and in this regard, GEWE has to be at the heart of its COVID-19 responses². COVID-19 emergency preparedness and response plans as well as long-term recovery plans must be grounded in sound gender analysis, considering gendered roles, risks, responsibilities, and social norms, as well as accounting for the unique capabilities and needs of vulnerable women's groups.
- 2. Sex-disaggregated data:** COVID-19 responses must be backed by sex-disaggregated data. This will guide policy-makers and programme designers to track, assess and develop timely gender analysis, which will support more effective and equitable response plans and actions. Sex-disaggregated data will also influence the allocation of resources and help in establishing a more inclusive response.
- 3. Gender-budgeting:** Financial responses to COVID-19 should be gender-responsive and acknowledge the differential needs of women and support gender-mainstreaming work related to COVID-19.

² Articles 3 and 4 of the AU Constitutive Act and Agenda 2063

4. **Scalable and high impact programmes synergised and owned at continental, regional and national levels:** The COVID-19 Gender-Responsive Responses Guidelines should serve to place a gender spotlight on all AU COVID-19 Responses designed and implemented at continental (AUC, Organs, Specialized Agencies, etc), regional (RECS/RMs) and national (Member States) levels, and ensure that women, men, girls and boys benefit equally from the responses.
5. **Strategic partnership and multi-sectoral approaches:** While COVID-19 responses may be government-led, strategic partnerships, collaboration and synergies must be developed, including strengthening relationships with Civil Society Organisations, faith-based and cultural-based organisations, media, private sector, international development partners, UN Agencies, development banks, and leveraging off existing networks and programmes. The AU Citizens must be fully mobilized to support governments' efforts to prevent, contain and end the pandemic.
6. **Effective and full inclusion of women:** COVID-19 responses cannot be carried out in isolation from recognizing women as agents of change, creators and innovators and to fully engage them as active citizens. Without such efforts the goals of Agenda 2063 of achieving gender equality may never be realized.
7. **Enforce existing commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment:** In these troubling times, regard should be had to existing commitments to protect women's rights and promote gender equality and women's empowerment by invoking the enforcement of existing mechanisms such as the Maputo Protocol on Women's Rights, AU Constitutive Act, Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa.
8. **Document and share what works, find new and innovative ways of measuring success and affirming good practices.** As COVID-19 is not a point in time pandemic and there is likely to be other pandemics in the future, it is important to invest in evidence-based research, learn from best practices and ensure that at all times, women and girls are at the centre of the emergency preparedness and response plans as well as the long-term recovery plans to build resilience against future shocks.



Photo: GettyImages

Impact on Women and the Economy

Women in Africa remain the majority of the poor, the dispossessed, the landless, the unemployed, those working in the informal sector, and those shouldering the burden of care, especially where war, hunger and disease have weakened state capacity and responses. In this regard, women are more likely to experience the negative effects of COVID-19 related measures, such as closure of borders and markets and curfews due to their economic insecurity.

On the other hand, African women have shown tremendous resilience, they run and own small informal businesses as a source of daily livelihood, which need to be recognised and taken to scale. Instead their business will be severely affected by COVID-19 movement restrictions and lockdowns. Many women work in the informal economy, where health insurance is likely to be non-existent or inadequate and income is not secure.³ Women are predominantly found in casual, low-paying and insecure employment and they are more likely to be hit hard by the economic downturn.

The majority of workers in the hospitality and leisure industry are women, who already face low wages, unreliable working hours and few or no benefits. With lockdowns that extend to restaurant closures, and more customers eating at home to avoid contagion, as well as hotel employees currently being out of work due to limited travel, those women face even bigger challenges of loss of income. Women also make up the majority of retail workers and as the retail sector is already experiencing strain, women risk losing employment. In the airline industry, where women are the majority of employees, for example, are likely to be on the receiving end of salary cuts or furlough without pay.

Informal cross-border trade (ICBT), a sector in which women predominate, will be hard hit by the lockdowns, social distancing and other measures that include trade

³ UNWOMEN, "Paying attention to women's need and leadership will strengthen COVID-19 response, March 19, 2020. www.unwomen.org

restrictions aimed at reducing the transmission of the virus. As women cross-border traders will lose their income, jobs and their small business close, they will lose their means of sustenance. COVID 19 will also have adverse effects on the successful implementation of the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Women cross-border traders who would have benefitted from this initiative, will lose out on great opportunities. Women's limited access to technology and digital transformative opportunities is also a challenge that will need to be addressed during and after the pandemic.

Guidelines for Gender Responsive Responses

- Establish special Funds at Member States level or make budgetary allocations towards gender-responsive responses to support emergency relief for women's enterprises as well as recovery measures to mitigate COVID-19 effects and to build resilience against any future economic and trade shocks.
- Support African women entrepreneurs to embrace digital transformation so that they can continue to offer their services and products nationally, regionally and internationally through online platforms.
- Provide digital entrepreneurship training bootcamps for African women to teach them how to establish an online presence and digital transformation for their businesses to survive post-Covid-19.
- Mobilize economic sustainability projects for women entrepreneurs to support their Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMME). These may include, among others, proving seed fund to produce Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) such as facial masks, hairnets and gowns using colorful African fabrics for local health care workers.
- Support measures should go beyond formal businesses or employment and special attention should be paid to the informal sector including part-time contractors/ employees, most of whom are women.
- Adopt regulations that prohibit laying off of employees during the lockdowns and to provide for paid leave especially for vulnerable women during the public emergency.



Photo: GettyImages

Impact on Women's Food Security and Agriculture

Agriculture is the backbone of most African economies, on average contributing 30% to 40% of GDP. Smallholder women farmers comprise nearly half of the labour force in Africa's agriculture sector. Lockdowns, border closures and movement restrictions may threaten the livelihood of these small-scale women farmers, especially due to their limited adaptive capacity and high levels of vulnerability. Women are more likely than men to suffer from food insecurity, even though women produce 60 to 80 per cent of labor in food production, both for household consumption and for sale. The spread of COVID-19 can devastate poor rural communities who already face challenges such as poor nutrition and limited access to resources.⁴

COVID-19 will also have an impact on the food security of poor families, especially school-going children and child-headed households who depend on school-feeding schemes for sustenance.

Special attention should be paid to women urban slum-dwellers or those living in informal settlement, who are mostly "hand-to-mouth" communities. The lockdowns and restricted movements will severely affect their source of livelihood.

Guidelines for Gender Responsive Responses

- Provide support to women in agriculture by putting together programs that will ensure availability of seeds, seedlings, irrigations, fertilizers and all other resources to mitigate the effects of the severity of COVID-19 on small-scale women farmers.

⁴ <https://www.ifad.org/en/covid19>

- Design, deliver and monitor food assistance and emergency agriculture support and agricultural livelihood-saving interventions with the engagement of women, men, girls and boys from different socio-economic backgrounds.
- Support rural women's participation in the digital economy including by providing training and capacity building in digital business management (e.g. marketing, communication and financial management).
- Localize responses to ensure that poor families are supported with food parcels during this pandemic to lessen the blow on them. Strategic partnerships should be established with community-based organizations for distribution and to assist in accessing those in need.
- Provide emergency food aid for families in dire need who live below poverty lines in urban slums or informal settlements.
- Promote the active participation of women, girls and other at-risk groups in all food security, agricultural and nutrition assessment processes, in line with the World Health Organisation (WHO)'s guidelines.



Photo: Africa CDC

Impact on Women and Health-Care

The face of healthcare in Africa is female. Women make up the majority of the health work force as nurses, midwives, and as caregivers. This places them at a higher risk of contracting the virus, while they are also the frontline responders to curb the pandemic. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), women form 70% of workers in the health and social sector,⁵ although the numbers decrease in leadership positions. Their dominance in the service fields and the social norm of being family caregivers could expose them to the disease at higher rates than men, shifting the medical burden as well.⁶ Women already do three-times as much unpaid care work than men and caring for relatives with the virus, adds to the burden.⁷

In addition, in Africa, elderly persons, in particular female elders in rural areas take care and raise their grandchildren while their parents are at work in the city. According to the WHO, older people face significant risk of developing severe illnesses if they contract the virus due to, among others, potential underlying health conditions.⁸ Care should be taken when family members from the urban areas who may be carrying the virus visit relatives in rural areas to avoid contaminating, especially the elderly people. This will not only increase mortality rate among the elderly, but it will also have an impact on family structures.

During pandemics, resources are typically diverted from routine health services and women's healthcare needs, such as regular access to contraceptives might be compromised. Pregnant women might be at a higher risk of not accessing their antenatal care when they stay away from health facilities due to quarantine restrictions or fears of contagion and misconception about virus transmission. This might lead to home births and an increase in maternal mortality.

⁵ Hutt Rosamond, World Economic Forum, "The coronavirus fallout may be worse for women than men. Here is why". 12 March, 2020

⁶ Elizabeth Ralph, "How Coronavirus hits women", <https://www.politico.com>

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/news/news/2020/4/supporting-older-people-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-is-everyones-business>

The AU's campaigns on Accelerated Reduction of Maternal Mortality in Africa (CARMMA) and Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa have been acclaimed for refocusing attention and resources on these critical, yet almost silent social inhibitors. However, COVID-19 has the potential to reverse some of the gains made over the years.

Guidelines for Gender Responsive Responses

- Design programmes to address protection for women health workers, including through training resources and protective equipment such as masks, gloves, head-gears, etc.
- Include more women of all ages in health leadership and decision-making. This is important because although women make up the majority of the health workforce in many countries in Africa, they are still underrepresented at senior levels.
- Devote resources towards researching the gendered implications of public health emergencies, especially disease outbreaks, so that public health preparedness and response plans can mitigate harm to women, including young women and girls.
- Collect disaggregated outbreak-related data by age, sex, and disability, so that health experts can understand differences in exposure and treatment and therefore tailor preventive measures.
- Build infrastructure for clean and potable water, including public hand washing stations in villages, communities and township.



Photo: GettyImages

Impact on Women and Access to Education

As educational institutions (childcare centres, schools, and universities) close, women will bear the impact as they are the majority workers in that sector. Furthermore, the efforts of young women and girls at home may be diverted to domestic chores and caregiving, to the detriment of their studies. Once this pattern is established, there is a real risk that it will persist even when schools are re-opened, and the educational ambitions and aspirations of young women and girls will be terminated because of economic hardship and prioritization of domestic needs. Girls' education has proven to be one of the most cost-effective strategies to promote development and economic growth. Studies have shown that educated mothers tend to have healthier, better nourished babies, and that their own children are more likely to attend school, thus helping break the vicious cycle of poverty.⁹

Guidelines for Gender Responsive Responses

- Provide alternative instructional materials for young women and girls using various digital platforms or through print media, radio and television broadcasts.
- Expand free internet access to increase access to online education and to have information on COVID-19.
- Launch public campaigns and strengthen advocacy about girls' education.
- Develop programmes to monitor girls' retention in schools and prioritize this in terms of provision of funding.

⁹ https://www.unicef.org/esaro/5481_girls_education.html



Photo: Gettyimages

Impact on Women's Physical and Psychological Integrity

The rights of women and girls to physical and psychological integrity are often compromised when women are subjected to violence and violation.¹⁰ Such may happen in the context of domestic violence, gender-based violence and sexual violence in conflict. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of lockdowns and restricted movements, there has been an increase in reports of domestic violations and other forms of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in countries most affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. Civil Society Organisations have noticed that extended quarantine and other social distancing measures have increased domestic violence and there are reports of a growing number of attacks on female healthcare workers as well¹¹. There are also reports of an increase in early child marriage and with children now home-schooling through the internet, there is also an increase in online sexual exploitation¹². These high levels of GBV are at odds with the vision of Agenda 2063 of “human security and a sharp reduction in violent crime”.¹³ For women who are already experiencing domestic violence, mandatory lockdowns to curb the spread of COVID-19, have trapped them in their homes with their abusers and isolated from the people and the resources that could help them.¹⁴ In general, mobility restrictions have increased survivors' vulnerability to abuse and need for protection services.

Guidelines for Gender Responsive Responses

- Requests budgetary allocation from the various special Funds set up at national or continental levels and mobilize more resources from international development partners and other sources to be dedicated

¹⁰ Karin Wilkins, Communicating Gender and Advocating Accountability in Global Development

¹¹ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/gbv-case-management-and-covid-19-pandemic>

¹² AU Department of Social Affairs' contributions during the webinar on the Impact of COVID-19 on GEWE, 23 April, 2020

¹³ Agenda 2063

¹⁴ <https://time.com/5803887/coronavirus-domestic-violence-victims/>

specifically for national rapid-responses to protect women and girls from GBV.

- Set up free hotlines to report domestic violence and strengthen services for all survivors of domestic violence.
- Vigilantly disseminate information and develop awareness-raising campaigns to combat domestic violence during the lockdowns.
- Establish or strengthen existing emergency shelters, safe houses and one-stop centres for survivors of GBV.
- Provide psychosocial support for women who experience GBV, this may include online counselling services.
- Establish or strengthen existing special units within the police to deal with domestic violence during this period of COVID-19;
- Raise awareness of police and judiciary about the increase of violence against women.
- Create special mechanisms to ensure that perpetrators of violence are speedily prosecuted and convicted



Photo: Gettyimages

Impact on Women's Participation in Decision-making

While some progress has been made in women's political participation and representation in parliaments, on the overall, the participation of women in political decision-making is still very limited in Africa. This health crisis puts women at risk of being further relegated to the background with no voice and no means to influence policies and decisions. As it is, there is a huge deficit of women's leadership in COVID-19 responses.¹⁵ National mechanisms like COVID-19 Task Forces and Committees rarely consider gender parity or women's effective inclusion. The voices of women are left out of the decision-making tables of COVID-19. Without women in these leadership positions, there is a higher probability that decisions that are taken would not address the differential challenges that women experience. In this regard, women's issues could fail to be addressed during and after the crises.

Guidelines for Gender Responsive Responses

- Invest in women's leadership and recognize their crucial contributions to the COVID-19 response, to ensure that both men and women's needs during and after the pandemic are adequately met.
- Ensure the effective, equal and full participation of women, including grassroots women in all mechanisms established to prevent, contain and end the virus. These include emergency protocols and all other national decision-making structures like National COVID-19 Task Forces and Committees as well as in response and recovery decision-making.
- Support women's rights organizations who are key players in providing services for women and include them in consultation and decision-making processes.
- Consult gender experts to assist and guide in designing gender responsive relief and recovery plans with the full participation of women.

¹⁵ Bineta Diop, Statement given during the ECOSOCC-AfDB Webinar on gender integration in COVID 19 responses, 24 April 2020



Photo: AMISOM

Impact on Women, Peace and Security

The COVID-19 pandemic may exacerbate suffering in countries already experiencing conflict. These are times when women's vulnerabilities are also heightened as they are exposed to violence and violations such as sexual exploitation and forced marriages. It is well documented that women and girls suffer in particularly tragic and life-changing ways from violence in conflicts.¹⁶ In the period that the AU has declared the "Year of Silencing the Guns", the pandemic, if it spreads to conflict zones, has the potential to bring catastrophic consequences for women and girls. It is therefore concerning that conflicts are not stopping, despite calls by the Chairperson of the African Union Commission¹⁷ and the UN Secretary General¹⁸ on belligerents to stop fighting and declare a ceasefire. The COVID-19 crisis is a security threat and calls for utmost mobilization and solidarity by all.¹⁹

Displaced women, migrants and those living in refugee camps will also be doubly-affected as there might be shortages of medical and other essential supplies such as sanitary pads and contraception as funds are redirected to address the pandemic. There might also be shortages of qualified staff in those camps to address specific needs. Women in conflict zones are not only victims, but they are also change-makers as they are in the forefront of community-based peace efforts while at the same time keeping their families together. This places them at further risks of not only contracting the virus and spreading it to their families, but also losing their means of sustenance as they can't continue to work when they are unwell.

¹⁶ Statement by the AU Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security, "Women, Peace and Security in the face of COVID-19"

¹⁷ AU Chairperson call for silencing the Guns in Covid period.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=AU+chairperson+call+for+silencing+the+Guns+in+covid+period&oq=AU&aqs=chrome..69j69j0l4j46j69i59.4137j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

¹⁸ COVID-19: UN chief calls for global ceasefire to focus on 'the true fight of our lives'.

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1059972>

¹⁹ Bineta Diop, Statement on "Women, Peace and Security in the face of COVID-19",

<https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20200416/women-peace-and-security-wps-face-covid-19>

Guidelines for Gender Responsive Responses

- Include women in peace and decision-making processes
- Continue to promote the zero-tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse
- Bring to justice perpetrators of sexual violence in conflict to avoid impunity
- Prioritize the needs of women in conflict zones
- Continue peacekeeping operation
- Develop National Action Plans on 1325 and where they are in existence, continue to implement their provisions during this COVID-19 pandemic



Photo: AMISOM

Impact on Women's Legal Protection

Agenda 2063 sets out a vision for “timely access to independent courts and judiciary that deliver justice without fear or favour”.²⁰ The disruptive impact of COVID-19 on existing legal, social and judicial structures means that security, justice and social services are likely to be severely curtailed, leaving limited avenues to services, safety and justice such as for survivors of Gender-Based Violence. This is a concern considering that legal protection for women in many countries remains weak and with the reprioritization of resources towards curbing the COVID-19 pandemic, women's legal protection might be at a greater risk.

Guidelines for Gender Responsive Responses

- Allow judicial institutions like courts to remain operational during lockdowns and enforce preventive measures such as mandatory masks, social distancing and limited number of public attendance.
- Use provisions of women's rights instruments such as the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA) and the Maputo Protocol on Women's Rights to shape gender-compliant responses to COVID-19. This is also important for recovery efforts that will follow after the pandemic.
- Emergency or new laws enacted to allow governments to implement measures to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 should be gender-responsive.
- Adopt COVID-19 measures based on duly promulgated legislation and respect the rule of law even during emergency responses.

²⁰ Agenda 2063



Photo: World Bank

Impact on Women's Access to information

There is unequal access to reliable information between women and men. Unequal access to information and communication technologies and literacy of many women can negatively affect their access to information. All messaging and information on COVID 19 must be appropriate, understandable and relayed through proven effective mechanisms, including through women's associations, faith based organizations and youth association.

Media houses also have a responsibility in how gender issues are portrayed in the media. Journalists have the power to amplify the voices of women and report on the disproportionate ways in which they are experiencing the effects of COVID-19 and challenge gender stereotypes. Media can and should play a part in making these voices heard. Women leadership in the media is also essential to ensure that key decisions include issues that affect women the most during and after the pandemic.

Guidelines for Gender Responsive Responses

- Launch gender-sensitive public campaigns and strengthen advocacy to prevent and contain the spread of the virus.
- Work very closely with the media to report accurate news and provide support in writing and broadcasting educational gender-sensitive programmes about COVID-19.
- Work with media houses to promote gender sensitive reporting as an essential part of media practices in COVID 19 coverage.
- Partner with media houses to seek out and report on women's stories and experiences of COVID-19
- Make information about COVID-19 easily accessible in plain language.
- Translate information about COVID-19 into local languages.

- Provide disability friendly information, such as sign language interpretation for televised announcements and websites accessible to people with vision and hearing disabilities
- Use provisions of the Maputo Protocol on Women's Rights that are under threat due to the pandemic e.g. socio- economic rights like health, employment and education, conduct massive online advocacy campaign- produce promotional materials, videos, booklets, and cartoon/ comic booklets for children to enhance Member States' national efforts.
- Target interventions for the youth, especially girls, to provide them with more opportunities for social and economic development, as well as information and communication materials.



Photo: GettyImages

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated, COVID-19 has multi-dimensional impacts on women, who are the majority of the population in most Africa countries. Women are likely to be disproportionately affected by the impact of this pandemic, and ignoring their concerns and needs in the COVID-19 responses, might threaten the consolidation of the gains made in the advancement of gender equality, women's empowerment and women's rights in the continent. It is therefore of critical importance that responses towards the prevention, containment, management and eradication of COVID-19, take into account gender equality and women's empowerment, so that women and girls are not left behind.



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