



AFRICA HEALTH
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Strategy and Plan of Action on the General impact of COVID-19 on Girls and Women



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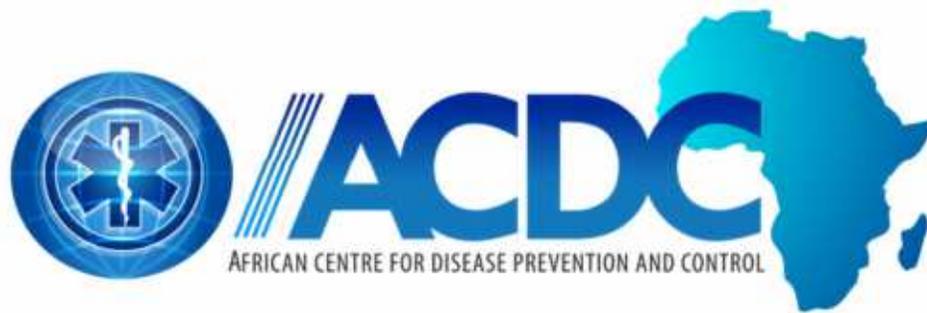


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Introduction

This report presents the AHO Strategy and Plan of Action on the general impact of COVID-19 on African girls and women. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many girls and women in Africa are experiencing negative impacts on their health, education, finances and a rise in gender-based violence. Therefore, it is essential that policymakers and governments implement measures and offer support across Africa to prevent multifaceted issues from rising and affecting the lives of girls and women in the continent.

The key objectives of the strategy are to:

1. Economically empower girls and women through offering them with more economic opportunities and support to combat their financial strains
2. Encourage the use of technology to provide education to girls and women in both urban and rural areas
3. Offer more health services which not only focus on combating the COVID-19 virus but also other key health issues which require immediate attention
4. Promote the use of technology for survivors to report gender-based violence and to offer them additional support and guidance

Evidently, the strategy identifies key issues that have risen as a consequence of COVID-19 as well as possible concrete solutions to combat said issues. Through these changes, more girls and women will receive the necessary support required to reduce gender inequalities and poverty, thereby enabling more girls and women in Africa to increase their overall wellbeing and human rights.

Background

This Strategy and Plan of Action on the general impact of COVID-19 on girls and women in Africa proposes a series of actions for tackling the nuance challenges that are creating various economic, physical, and educational issues for girls and women during this pandemic. Consequently, the strategy concentrates on actions which aim to significantly increase the support and services that are available for girls and women in urban and rural regions in Africa, thus combating gender disparities coupled with geographical inequalities in accessing support.

Key Findings

Economic impact of COVID-19 on Girls and Women

Women are also experiencing great economic hardship as a result of COVID-19. The informal sector has been put at great risk due to the pandemic in which 90% of the labour force in the African continent is women (WHO, 2020). 74% of African women make up the informal sector (OHCHR, 2020) within sectors such as street vendors and domestic workers. The informal sector is integral as it offers women employment. As a result of COVID-19, the informal sector has experienced significant affects consisting of border and business closures, as well as various travel restrictions. Consequently, resulting in short and long term economic and social disempowerment, thereby leaving African women vulnerable to poverty.

According to the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), around 29 million Africans are likely to experience extreme poverty below USD 1.90 per day as a result of the pandemic (Tesemma, 2020). The COVID-19 outbreak puts girls and young women in particular at greater risk of withdrawing from schools to seek jobs to support their family, thereby increasing the likelihood of less girls and young women at school post-pandemic (Tesemma, 2020). Evidently, economic hardships due to the pandemic is leading to a return to traditional gender social norms (Tesemma, 2020). This in turn can result in early marriages as cultural practices such as dowry and bride prices provide a gateway for financial benefits for families struggling financially (Tesemma, 2020).

Health impact of COVID-19 on Girls and Women

Despite the fact that women in Africa only make up 40% of COVID-19 cases, this percentage is found to be more than 55% in countries such as South African (WHO, 2020). Lockdowns have had a disproportionate effect on women and girls due to the lack of crucial health services available to them. This includes access to antenatal care for pregnant women, thus increasing the risk for home births and a rise in maternal mortality (OHCHR, 2020), thereby exacerbating health issues amongst women and girls in the continent.

Notably, the heavy focus on reducing cases of COVID-19 has drawn attention away from health services focusing on sexual and reproductive health. Primary data from Zimbabwe found that from January to April 2020, a decrease of 42% of caesarean sections was executed thus significantly contrasting from that performed in 2019 (WHO, 2020). Moreover, the number of new patients receiving birth control pills decreased drastically by 90% whilst the number of live births decreased by 21% (WHO, 2020).

According to Lancet Global Health, there has been a reduction of the use of maternal health services by 9.8-18.5% which has the potential to result in around 12,000 more

maternal deaths for low- and- middle-income countries within only six months (WHO, 2020).

Moreover, a large proportion of women in Africa have the responsibility of caring for the sick and most health workers such as nurses and midwives are women. This creates more health, financial and emotional burden on African women for the overall wellbeing of their families and their countries.

Educational impact of COVID-19 on Girls and Women

On 6 April 2020, more than 20 million students in pre-primary school, 160 million students in primary school, 56 million at secondary school and 8 million students at tertiary school across Africa, no longer had access to education during lockdown (Global Partnership, 2020). Schools are essential safe havens for girls and young women. At school, they are less likely to experience abuse, gender-based violence and poverty at home, however the current crisis has removed the protection of girls by schools (Global Partnership, 2020).

From March 2020, most schools; public and private institutions, have closed down in many African countries with little investment in education (UNESCO, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated educational disparities amongst girls in Africa. As a result of the pandemic, more than 11.2 million girls and young women are at risk of not returning back to school (UNESCO, 2020). This educational impact is highly significant as school closures leave girls and young women vulnerable to forced labour and inadequate nutrition due to the inability to access daily meals from educational institutions (UNESCO, 2020). Girls and young women are disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 crisis as they are at great risk of early pregnancy and marriage, thereby hindering them from continuing with their studies and gaining economic independence (UNESCO, 2020).

Gender-based violence and the impact of COVID-19 on Girls and Women

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a greater risk of gender-based violence against girls and women in Africa. A report from UN Women found that domestic violence in particular has increased significantly across the African continent (WHO, 2020). Economic, security and health strains has led to greater tensions within the household exacerbated by poor and confined living conditions during the lockdown, consequently leading to a rise in gender-based violence against African girls and women (WHO, 2020).

Many women in the African continent have had to live in quarantine and self-isolation in households with violent partners which in turn has led to a rise in domestic and intimate partner violence (OHCHR, 2020). The majority of these women are left with minimal guidance on how to quarantine separately from their violent partners or information on services available to help them (OCHR, 2020). Within the diaspora of gender-based violence and COVID-19, many experiences of different women are

being ignored such as women nurses being subjected to violence due to a fear of them being infectious, as well as women with disabilities experiencing multiple inter-sectional violence (OCHR, 2020).

Strategy Objectives

Key objectives:

1. Call for all governments and policymakers across Africa to provide more economical support and aid to empower women, particularly those who have been heavily affected by economic strains during the COVID-19 pandemic, This can be attained through offering these women with more economic opportunities and financial aid to reduce the losses from lockdown restrictions
2. Call for all African governments to ensure that technology and the internet is provided to all girls and women including those in rural regions who often struggle to access online learning platforms. Through this government intervention, more girls and women will receive an education even in the mid of the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby reducing gender and geographical disparities in education in Africa
3. Call for governments in Africa to offer girls and women more health services and not just those focusing on coronavirus cases. This in turn will ensure that other critical health issues are not overlooked during this pandemic, thus decreasing the risk of deteriorating health issues
4. Call for governments to encourage survivors of gender-based violence to use technology for reporting whilst also offering them more support and available services to support them mentally, physically and emotionally

Strategy Proposal

Goal 1

To provide economical support to women who are experiencing financial strains as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic

- Socio-economic assessments and employment policies should include a gender viewpoint to prevent women from being marginalised in the conversation
- Governments and policymakers should integrate the informal sector within policies and measures to tackle the economic impact of COVID-19
- Financial support and basic goods should be made available to women to empower them during the pandemic
- More measures should be placed to guarantee job security within vulnerable sectors of the economy
- Leasing fees, evictions and debts should be halted in relation to the developments of COVID-19, this in turn will reduce financial strain on women and their families

Goal 2

Influence policy, practices and budgets across national and international level to ensure that all health services are available for girls and women during this COVID-19 pandemic

- More support is required to reduce delays of women and girls receiving care and access to needed health services such as campaigns of sensitisation to inform women and girls on available services
- Gender and women's right viewpoint should be employed within health care services as well as within the overall response to the pandemic
- Governments should ensure that all women and girls have equal universal access to health services including access to contraceptives and post-natal care for pregnant women
- Women and girls should receive dedicated mental health services to support them during the pandemic

- Health care workers including nurses and midwives should be allocated vital protection gears

Goal 3

To offer educational personnel with the relevant training and resources to provide all girls and young women with online education during COVID-19

- Offer alternative means of education in the African continent through broadcasting education on television, radio or even online should be implemented
- Governments, policymakers, and non-governmental organisations (NGO's) should work closely with parents and teachers to detect the factors affecting girls and young women from not accessing educational alternatives
- Governments should help to provide digital infrastructures as only 34% of African households have access to the internet and 89% of students within sub-Saharan Africa do not have a computer within their homes (UNESCO, 2020), thus preventing many girls and young women from accessing the internet for educational purposes
- Remedial sources should be provided to students to ensure that those struggling during the pandemic do not fall behind on their learning or even drop out of school all together
- Training should be offered to teachers on virtual curricula, this in turn will ensure that all students in rural and urban regions are receiving a quality education

Goal 4

To develop nation frameworks for addressing Gender-based violence against girls and women during COVID-19

- Governments and policymakers should encourage women to utilise new technology methodologies to report incidents of gender-based violence
- Governments and policymakers should help to strengthen community structures to enable women and girls to report gender-based violence
- The criminal justice system across the continent should prioritise cases of gender-based violence

- Governments should create shelters for women, children and their families to escape domestic violence with allocated funding and trained staff members
- Professionals such as healthcare staff, the police and prosecutors should receive the necessary skills and information needed to better report cases of gender-based violence and to offer guidance to focused experts
- It is vital that the response to COVID-19 to the public consists of technological solutions and guidance to survivors and victims of gender-based violence

Financial Requirements

In order for this strategy and plan of action to be successful it requires financial support from a variety of different stakeholders and their long-term commitment. The success of this strategy and plan of action is heavily reliant on a multi-agency approach in which resources are gained from different inter-sector organisations and partnerships so that all needs are met to provide aid and support to all girls and women across the African continent.

Some financial considerations could include:

- Training days allocated to various health care providers to tackle COVID-19 cases, as well as other health issues that have been neglected in light of the pandemic
- Resources should be provided for schools and communities to ensure that each child has access to technology for education
- The creation of seminars and conferences needed to continue the discussion of the general impact of COVID-19 on girls and women in Africa which in turn will lead to more concrete actions to combat issues exacerbated by the epidemic
- Financial aid and support should be available for girls and women who are experiencing financial strains and losses as a result of lockdowns and the COVID-19 virus overall

Monitoring, Analysis and Evaluation

The strategy of providing more support for girls and women in Africa concerning COVID-19, requires more monitoring and evaluation in order to reduce any financial, health, physical, gender and geographical inequalities from occurring. In addition to this, there must be an increase in surveillance on this topic of the impact of COVID-19 on African girls and women, this will also work to reveal the strengths and weaknesses, future actions and future evaluations of services and support designed to support them.

AHO will continue to utilise information and data from African countries to monitor the progress of the recommended strategies above. These techniques for gathering data will consist of analysing documents, observations, interviews, and statistical data from reports and feedback from the communities that are involved in the interventions. Through gaining both quantitative and qualitative research from those directly impacted by the interventions, more accurate evaluation of the interventions will be gained, resulting in more long-term positive effects.

AHO will thus implement a system of monitoring and evaluation to provide biennial report of the Strategy and Plan of Action. This will be measured by the following indicators:

- Number of countries that have developed policies to foster an increasing attendance of girls at both the primary and secondary level
- Proportion of national budgets allocated to education policy and specifically girls' education
- Number of countries with up-to-date information and biennial reporting on school attendance and attainment
- Number of vulnerable areas that have implemented programs or interventions that incorporate education, health, and economic policies
- Number of countries with teacher training plans in place, including ones which promote girls' education and opportunities
- Number of countries that have active community outreach programs and services liaising with health care providers
- Number of vulnerable areas that have mechanisms at the municipal level to permit the participation of women and other community actors in development planning

Summary

In essence, COVID-19 has disproportionately affected girls and women in various ways. As a result of lockdown and restrictions of movement, many women who make up the majority of the informal sector have been unable to continue with their livelihoods during the pandemic, thereby leading to a rise in financial strains on families and communities. This economic issue has been intensified by the lack of access to technology and the internet for students especially those in rural areas and so many are left without the means to continue with their education during school closures. To make matters worse, the health care sector has neglected many health issues to prioritise COVID-19 cases instead, this has meant that many girls and women are not receiving the necessary medical assistance they need thus creating more health issues. Moreover, lockdown has meant that the safety of schools is no longer available for those living with domestic abusers in the household and financial tensions on families has triggered a sense of frustration for some and consequently led to a spike in gender-based violence against girls and women in Africa.

Evidently, COVID-19 is having a significant negative impact on girls and women in Africa creating economical, health, education and gender inequalities for them. Hence, AHO strongly urges governments and policymakers across the continent to provide more assistance and services to girls and women who are struggling during this epidemic. Through greater government interventions, girls and women will be able to increase their overall wellbeing which will help to promote gender equality and equity within Africa.

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