



Policy Dialogue on Ending Violence against Women and Girls

Action to Guarantee Women's Safety

Final Report

Introduction

On 10 December 2020, African Union Commission - Women, Gender and Development Directorate, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) organized a virtual multi-stakeholder policy dialogue under the theme “Ending Violence against Women and Girls: Action to Guarantee Women's Safety in Africa”. The event aimed at mobilizing the commitment of African Union (AU) Member States and other stakeholders to ensure ongoing COVID-19 response and recovery efforts integrate gender equality and women's rights. The policy dialogue provided a forum for AU Member States, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), development partners, CSOs, youth and the media representatives to share best practices and innovative strategies to secure the gains of women and girls during and after the COVID-19 crisis. A policy brief on the situation of Gender Based Violence (GBV) in the context of COVID-19 in Africa, was presented and discussed. The meeting adopted a Call to Action with clear recommendations to address the needs of women and girls through multi-sectoral responses in order to end GBV and to strengthen gender equality and women's empowerment.

Opening Session: COVID19's impact on the lives of African Women and Girls

The moderator, **Thokozile Ruzvidzo**, Director of the Gender, Poverty and Social Policy Division at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), opened the policy dialogue by encouraging participants to interrogate the successes and challenges faced in implementing the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol), over 15 years after it had come into force, and other key GEWE commitments.

Victoria Maloka, Ag. Director of the African Union Commission - Women, Gender and Development Directorate (AUC-WGDD), in her opening remarks noted that 2020 is a year where we are celebrating achievements as it marks 25 years since the Beijing Platform of Action and the end of African Women's Decade 2010-2020. But 2020 is also a year where we are mourning the regression of women's rights due to COVID-19. She emphasized that the Call to Action that will be drafted based on the discussions will be not be a mere statement but a real commitment to action to ensure that we are never caught off guard in any disaster that will come after COVID-19. She encouraged participants to bequeath to the next generation an Africa free from COVID-19 and violence against women and girls.

In reading UN Women Executive Director, Dr. Phumzile Mlambo Ngcuka's statement on the occasion of the 16 days activism against GBV, **Marie Goretti Nduwayo**, Regional Liaison Advisor, noted that there is a close connection between the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise in reported violence of all



kinds against women and girls; a connection which is often referred to as the shadow pandemic. She however highlighted the difference in how societies and public services responded to citizens who present with a life-threatening illness such as COVID-19, and those who come for help with a life- or health- threatening partner. She shared her conviction that if the world collaborates on the same scale it did to tackle COVID-19, it will be possible to end violence against women and girls. She noted that the [Generation Equality](#) Forum and its multi-stakeholder Action Coalitions reflect this consistent, holistic approach with a five-year plan to engage on change that is systematic and lasting. Moreover, she stressed the need to involve men and boys as allies in this fight and hold them to account when they violate the rights of women and girls.

Adwoa Kufuor, Officer in Charge and Regional Gender Advisor at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) East Africa Regional Office, reiterated how measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 have led to an increase in violence against women and girls. Based on lessons from the crisis, she suggested five actions; 1) end gender-based discrimination 2) integrate GBV into health and economic strengthening operations, 3) ensure women's equal participation in decision making in response to the pandemic, 4) ensure that disaggregated data is collected, and 5) put in place laws and policies that address the needs of women.

Caroline Ngonze, Chief, ad-interim and Officer-In-Charge at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Liaison Office to the AUC and ECA, echoed how COVID-19 is aggravating violence against women and girls and shared her concern that if progress is not accelerated, it will take almost 50 years to end child marriage. She underlined the need to tackle the root cause of violence against women and girls, which is the subordinate position of women and girls in society and that economies and legal systems must be restructured to guarantee every woman equal opportunities and safety. She reminded participants on the need to foster Respect for women and girls by changing harmful attitudes and practices; the need to Protect women and girls from GBV and harmful practices through enforcement of laws; and that States have the ultimate responsibility to Respect, Protect and Fulfill obligations on women and girls' rights.

Memouna Baboni Yacoubou, Chairperson, Specialized Technical Committee on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, thanked the organizers for coordinating the policy discussion to deliberate on key actions against violence against women and girls. She applauded Member States who put in place policies to fight violence against women and girls as part of their efforts to end COVID-19 and underlined that Member States need to take accelerated actions to eliminate domestic violence, child marriage and all forms of violence against women and girls. She closed her remarks by calling upon Member States to join efforts and make the continent safe for women and girls.

Presentation of the Policy Brief: The State of GBV in the Context of COVID-19 in Africa

Dr. Jacinta Muteshi presented the main findings of a policy brief on state of GBV in the context of COVID-19 in Africa, which had been commissioned by AU-WGDD, UN Women, OHCHR and UNFPA.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, emerging data and reports from those on the front lines have shown that all types of violence against women and girls have intensified. There have been reports of abuse such as intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), domestic and sexual abuse of women and girls in many cases by family members, which are exacerbated particularly under lockdowns, restricted movements and school closures. Furthermore, survivors of gender-based violence have had limited access to legal protection services as courts are suspended, constrained, or legal aid centers are closed.



Some staggering data on the surge of GBV in Africa during the pandemic outlined in the policy brief are the following:

- ▶ A study conducted in six Sahelian countries showed that domestic violence, whether physical or verbal, increased from 40.6% before the COVID-19 crisis to 52.2% during the pandemic crisis, a rate of increase of 12%.
- ▶ The East African Community Partner States have reported a sharp increase in the number of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) cases. Ministries responsible for Gender across the region have reported a 48% increase in the Gender-Based Violence cases reported to the Police or through the GBV Toll-Free lines

Dr. Muteshi identified three main responses and recovery strategies that have been evident in the region: (1) Strengthening of services for women survivors, (2) Innovative and collaborative efforts to create awareness-raising and campaigns, and (3) Improved collection and use of violence against women data in the COVID-19 context. She presented specific measures that AU Member States in all regions of Africa have taken to respond to the surge of GBV in these three areas.

Dr. Muteshi concluded her presentation with the following recommendations:

- ▶ Member states need to establish and strengthen legal, health and support systems and institutions . There is need to ensure that institutional mechanisms are fully responsive to the rights and needs of women and girls during COVID-19.
- ▶ Stakeholders need to step up advocacy and awareness campaigns, including targeting men at home.
- ▶ AU, Member States, and development partners need to support the strengthening of data and evidence.
- ▶ Member States and development partners need to sustain commitment to adequately fund strategies for ending GBV in COVID 19.

She called attention to the fact that the African Union has outlined clear guidance for moving forward in the guidelines ["African Union Guidelines on Gender Responsive COVID-19 Response"](#).

Discussion on the AU theme: Orange Africa: Action to Guarantee Women's Safety

Following the presentation of the policy brief, panellists representing Regional Economic Communities (RECs), civil society, youth, media and development partners responded to questions from the moderator on their various roles in ending GBV and promoting gender equality during COVID-19 and in the recovery process.

Béatrice Hamusonde from the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) spoke about how RECs can bridge the gaps in implementation, monitoring and reporting on GBV to complement efforts by the AU and Member States. She highlighted that RECs have an important role in ensuring coordination between its Member States. By providing platforms for exchange and sharing of best practices, they can support Member States in the development and implementation of policies and strategies to end GBV. She also underlined the importance of building partnerships with CSOs, academia, youth organisation and other actors, to ensure that stakeholders are all working together to ensure that GBV coordination, prevention and response mechanisms are put into action.



Ibrahima Bob from Gender is My Agenda Campaign (GIMAC), representing the civil society, shared his thoughts about how CSOs have been able to make a difference in the fight to end GBV. He reminded participants of the essential role women have been playing during the COVID-19 pandemic, at the forefront to distribute essential goods such as food and masks and sensitize communities on the impacts of the pandemic. He called upon the AU to help amplify the voices of CSOs, assist them in accessing platforms to bring in their perspectives and recommendations on how to tackle COVID-19 in a gender-sensitive way, and to provide partnership platforms at regional and sub regional levels to mobilize efforts and resources to end GBV.

Gakii Bikiri from the Africa Youth Steering Committee outlined some ways in which youth can make an impact in the efforts to end GBV. She highlighted the role of youth in the generation of data and research to create a robust evidence base to inform, guide and justify all advocacy efforts to end GBV. Furthermore, she underlined the need to include men, and in particular male survivors of GBV, in sensitization campaigns against GBV.

Candice Verlot, Political Officer at the Delegation to the EU to the AU, speaking on the development partners' perspective, reminded participants that COVID-19 is an amplifier, not a cause, for GBV, and reiterated the EU's commitment to fight the shadow pandemic, including through the provision of 250mn Euros to Africa through the spotlight initiative to address GBV, FGM and violence against women. She highlighted the critical role that men play in efforts to end GBV as well as the need for better data on GBV and systematic monitoring and reporting.

Comfort Mussa from African Women in Media spoke about the role of the media in eliminating gender stereotypes. She highlighted the need to make sure media are part of the solution and not part of the problem in fighting GBV. She observed that there is still a lot of media content that trivializes GBV and called upon media to responsibly use their power to change perceptions and behaviours. Ms Mussa also urged media to adopt creative approaches and strategies to communicate information about GBV in order to mobilize and inspire public action. She recommended the importance of empowering journalists through capacity building initiatives such as storytelling bootcamps to enhance their knowledge on how to report about GBV in an impactful way. Furthermore, she highlighted the need to include women in editorial and decision-making positions in media houses in order to ensure the inclusion of their perspectives in all media work and products.

The panel discussion was followed by an interactive session that allowed participants in the policy dialogue to ask questions, comment on specific interventions and discuss with the panellists.

An important area of discussion was data collection. Discussants agreed on the need to collect data that is disaggregated by sex, gender, age and intersecting forms of discrimination. However, as of today, only 13 African countries have taken additional measures to improve GBV data collection during the pandemic. It was highlighted that academics and researchers should be engaged in the data collection process. Furthermore, RECs can support Member States to pull information together to fill the data gap on GBV and conduct capacity building and training on data collection, analysis and dissemination. Discussants agreed on the need to create common reporting tools used by all AU Member States. Finally, participants highlighted the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration and the active engagement of communities in data collection and sharing.

Regarding funding and resources, discussants agreed that investment to end GBV is still lagging. Just as measures have been taken to address COVID-19, there should be a coordinated effort to tackle GBV, and the successful COVID-19 response should be the blueprint for GBV response in the short, medium and long term. There is need to strengthen services provided to women survivors and to coordinate



health and economic investments to strengthen gender equality and women's empowerment in the context of COVID-19.

Education was highlighted as an important factor to end GBV. Discussants observed that keeping girls and young women in school and the expansion of secondary school education can help to prevent early pregnancy, GBV and HIV for women. On the gendered impacts of HIV, participants urged Member States to commit to address the interlinkages between GBV and HIV, recognizing GBV is not only a driver of vulnerability that increases risk to HIV, but also as a risk factor that can undermine the optimal effectiveness and impact of HIV services and investments made in Africa's AIDS Response. Additionally, AU Member States are urged to recognize access to secondary education as an important tool to reduce GBV, HIV and other vulnerabilities and ultimately empower women and girls to claim their rights and stand up for a more just and equal society.

Following the interventions and discussions, a Call to Action was adopted, which included tangible set of recommendations to address the needs of women and girls through multi-sectoral responses to end GBV and to strengthen gender equality and women's empowerment (see Annex)

Closing session

Lehau Victoria Maloka thanked panellists, moderator and participants for their contribution to the informative policy dialogue held at the last day of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence in 2020 and affirmed that it will be the beginning of the 365 days of activism against GBV. She reiterated the importance of a multisectoral approach, disaggregated data, monitoring and evaluation tools, accountability, positive masculinity and the engagement of traditional and religious leaders to walk this journey all together to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls.

Marie Goretti Nduwayo highlighted the need for multi-sectoral partnerships to end GBV and reiterated the importance of the media in these efforts. She underlined the need to use technology in the fight against GBV. Ms Nduwayo mentioned that UN Women has developed a study on Online and ICT facilitated violence against women and girls during COVID-19 with recommendations that are relevant to efforts to ensure women's safety in Africa.

Adwoa Kufuor reiterated that the fight to end GBV is a joint one and that only through joint action including all actors it is possible to realize a world without GBV. She urged everybody to stand together in solidarity and urgency.

Caroline Ngonze called attention to the confirmed nexus between COVID-19, displacement caused by climate change and GBV, and urged for the integration of GBV in climate change vulnerability assessments. She highlighted the importance of ensuring that COVID-19 response and recovery plans are gender-responsive and address the practical needs of women and their strategic interests in preventing, responding and coordinating GBV action.



ANNEX

Policy Dialogue on Ending Violence against Women and Girls

“Action to Guarantee Women’s Safety”

Call to Action

This Call to Action is made in response to the strategies and recommendations from the multi-stakeholder commemorative policy dialogue on *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls - Action to Guarantee Women’s Safety*, conducted on 10 December 2020.

We, the participants of the virtual policy dialogue, reiterate our common objective of ending violence against women and girls in Africa.

We recommit to take measures to prevent and respond to gender-based violence and to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment in the COVID-19 recovery process as follows:

AU Member States

- Integrate and budget for Gender Based Violence (GBV) prevention, response and multi-stakeholder coordination in all aspects of COVID-19 response and recovery strategies and ensure its funding and the full and meaningful participation and leadership of women and their organizations at all levels.
- Strengthen the capacity of justice, law enforcement and human rights institutions to address and respond to GBV .
- Create special mechanisms to ensure that perpetrators of violence are speedily prosecuted and convicted.
- Take measures to address the interlinkages between GBV and HIV, recognizing GBV as a driver and risk factor to HIV that can undermine the effectiveness and impact of HIV services and investments made in Africa's AIDS response.
- Take measures to strengthen access to education as an important tool to reduce vulnerabilities and end GBV.
- Ensure the protection, support and fair compensation of COVID-19 frontline responders such as health workers, midwives and social service providers as part of health system strengthening.
- Integrate women’s economic empowerment and gender equality in employment and social protection systems, including in the informal sector, in all aspects of COVID-19 recovery plans.

Regional and International organizations as well as development partners

- Increase resources to all providers of GBV services and make flexible funding available for women’s rights organizations working in the intersection of COVID-19 and GBV.
- Invest in the preventative aspect of women and girl's vulnerabilities to GBV by investing in education for girls.



- Build partnerships to ensure multi-stakeholder coordination and collaboration in the fight against GBV.
- Mainstream gender in all development engagement and ensure that it is proactively built into its thought leadership and advocacy functions

Civil Society Organisations and youth

- Develop awareness-raising campaigns to combat GBV.
- Deliver focused trainings and other capacity building initiatives for enhanced prevention and response to GBV at national and community levels
- Document and report on cases of GBV in the context of COVID-19 and in the recovery process.
- Hold governments and development partners accountable for commitments made to end GBV.

Media

- Develop gender strategies that inform the development of stories and news items.
- Include women in editorial and decision-making positions in media houses in order to ensure the inclusion of their perspectives in all media work and products.
- Find creative strategies and tool to communicate information about GBV to the public in order to translate facts and trends into commitment and action to end GBV.
- Organize gender-sensitive media training for journalists and media to strengthen their capacity to apply a gender lens in their reporting, language use, representation and addressing of GBV.
- Build media partnerships and media networks on GBV in Africa.

Private sector

- Mainstream gender in all private sector engagement and ensure that it is proactively built into its thought leadership and advocacy functions
- Ensure that GBV related priorities are embedded within structures, processes and existing private sector funding programs.

All actors

- Eliminate harmful stereotypes relating to the roles and responsibilities of women and men in society and in the family and mobilize support to challenge traditional ideas about masculinity and patriarchy.
- Engage men and boys as well as traditional and religious leaders in GBV prevention, response and coordination initiatives
- Identify and engage with change agents who can champion commitments to end GBV in all AU organs and coordinate its implementation.
- Enhance capacity of GBV data collection, including through common reporting tools, capacity building programs at state and community levels and multi-sector collaboration including with universities and research institutions.
- Systematically collect sex, gender and age disaggregated data to understand the gender-specific human rights impact of COVID-19 to inform the recovery process.



- Increase the number of centers for counselling and shelters as well as the capacity of women and victims of sexual and gender-based violence to access medical, psychological, psychosocial, and legal services.
- Strengthen accountability for all state and non-state actors in ending GBV.
- Strengthen monitoring of the implementation of the key continental commitments to end GBV at national, regional and global levels through consistent reporting under the Maputo Protocol, the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA) and other relevant frameworks.
- Invest in addressing GBV and harmful practices in conflict and post-conflict settings.