Gender equality (SDG5)

Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls[42]

Challenges to the empowerment of women and girls – the global picture

- Lockdowns are increasing the risk of violence against women and girls, of a physical, sexual and psychological nature. Cases of domestic violence have increased by 30% in some countries (United Nations, 2021).[43]

- The intensification of violence against women and girls is being dubbed the 'Shadow Pandemic' by the United Nations (UN Women, 2021).[44]

- "Stress, the disruption of social and protective networks, loss of income and decreased access to services all can exacerbate the risk of violence for women. In addition, access to sexual and reproductive health services will likely become more limited. Other services, such as hotlines, crisis centres, shelters, legal aid, and protection services may also be reduced, making it difficult for women to access the few sources of help that would usually be available." (World Health Organization, n.d.)[45]

- Women already spend about three times as many hours on unpaid domestic and care work as men (UN Women, 2021)[46] but this has increased substantially during the pandemic.

In Maddu, Uganda, two women extend education services during the Covid-19 pandemic to ensure a bright future for the children.
© Allen Lunkuse

Challenges to the empowerment of women and girls – local community perspectives

Many individual women in communities and organised women's groups report that discrimination against women and girls is nothing new and a scourge to be tackled at the best of times. However, conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic have exacerbated the problem.

"With a "reasonable" number of heads of cattle, most parents in this community would not think twice about getting their daughter out of school and marrying them off to the next stranger."

Betty Zalwango, Maddu, Uganda [47]

Their anecdotal reports mirror official reports that domestic violence is on the rise during the pandemic. Family members have lost jobs and income is scarce, causing greater frustration, which is channelled into domestic violence. One reason that violence against girl children has increased is because schools are closed and they are staying at home (Maddu, Uganda, 2021). [48]

Violence against girl children in the form of early marriages has also risen during the pandemic period. This is happening in some contexts where families receive dowry payments for the marriage of their daughters. When parents lose jobs and face economic hardship during the pandemic, they look to their daughters' early marriage as a source of cash and assets. Some of these girls are early teens, well below the age of consent, and early marriage is a breach of their human rights.

Gender-based violence affecting women of all ages is pervasive across countries and societies. In the Mount Elgon region of western Kenya,[49] women community leaders Diana Noormishuki Chesengei and Evelin Namalwa have spearheaded public information campaigns to inform community members about

In Kenya, indigenous women are faced with multiple challenges given their remote locations, traditional customs and patriarchal values. Evelin Namalwa, a community health volunteer, has been acting as a communication link between healthcare workers and households during the pandemic.
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how to combat Covid-19. However, as interviewer Rose Wamalwa explains, "Their initiatives have not been without obstacles. In indigenous communities in Kenya, women are considered inferior to men and have to abide by the directives given by their husbands. In the past, Mama Evelin had even been abducted and almost killed because of her work on women's empowerment. Currently, she coordinates a group of 50 women who are working to create pandemic-related awareness. A majority of these women are victims of physical abuse and rape."

In Isiolo county, Kenya, women's groups believe that lockdowns and increased police powers have created conditions where gender-based violence and sexual harassment can more easily occur. "The curfew hours provided security officers with an opportunity to ask for money as bribes and sexual favours from women in exchange for not arresting them and taking them to the court," says Grace Lolim of Isiolo Gender Watch.[50]

Gender-based violence affects not only girls and women who were designated female at birth; it also affects transgender and intersex people, such as the hijra (transgender) community of Bangladesh.[51] Hijra people are recognised as a third gender under Bangladeshi law but face widespread discrimination nonetheless. The Covid-19 pandemic has made things worse, though. "Shops and homes denied to help them as they were perceived as unclean and obvious virus carriers," reports Joya Sikder, a hijra activist.[52]

Grassroots solutions for achieving empowerment of women and girls

Girls

Interventions to address the specific risks to girls include:

- Keeping girls in education, even if it is a makeshift arrangement;

- Addressing boys' and guardians' attitudes to girls' rights.

Schooling. In Uganda, schools have been closed due to the pandemic. In Maddu, a rural dryland county, Betty Zalwango is a young, aspiring teacher with school-age siblings at home, who were losing interest in learning. Ms Zalwango decided to home-school her siblings to motivate their interest in learning again. She then opened her house and welcomed friends' and neighbours' children to the informal classroom. She was permitted to borrow textbooks and materials from the primary school, to teach a small group of children.

Ms Zalwango's model has been adopted by a new NGO in the area, which has engaged teachers, formed learning groups of 20 students per teacher, and provided textbooks. The teachers are given a stipend by the NGO. These activities have played an important

In Kenya, indigenous women are tapping into local resources, and undertaking individual and collective initiatives to tackle the Covid-19 crisis.
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role in keeping girls in school and less vulnerable to domestic violence and sexual coercion.

Ms Zulwango has kept local youngsters' hopes alive for gaining an education, says Allen Lunkuse, a community development worker.[53] That said, this community-based model is not the ideal long-term solution: a true solution would be achieved through adequate government resourcing for vaccination in the community and the Covid-safe reopening of schools.

Attitudes. Interventions may be required 'on the spot' to prevent breaches of girls' rights. These spot interventions can accompany longer-term educational efforts. Sarah Namugga is a Community-based Civic Educator and Monitor with ACTADE in Maddu, Uganda.[54] She found herself intervening in a family's attempt to marry their 15-year-old daughter to a 17-year-old boy for dowry. She was successful in preventing the marriage and the children's parents were penalised and both families counselled.

In another case, Ms Namugga reports that "a father had refused to take his daughter back to school after the first [Covid-19] wave and lockdown, claiming she was overgrown, despite her desire to continue with school." She persuaded the father that it was his daughter's right to continue her education, and the girl re-enrolled subsequently, on a vocational course.

This story demonstrates the ongoing need for engagement and awareness-raising in communities around girls' rights. Trained and dedicated social

workers like Ms Namugga are needed to pursue such work consistently. The work is "limited by inadequate financial support,…[and] high illiteracy levels in the community also made people easily led by misinformation," observes Allen Lunkuse.[55]

Communications campaigns. In Isiolo county, Kenya,[56] Grace Lolim and Isiolo Gender Watch have instigated radio talk shows to discuss the importance of Covid hygiene measures, such as social distancing, wearing masks and washing hands. They also perceived that the introduction of Covid-related lockdowns was putting girls more at risk of abuse – and they are using public communications channels to campaign against this: "On 13 August 2020, a young girl was sexually abused and taken hostage by the police. Isiolo Gender Watch shared this information on social media, which immediately gained attention from the local authorities. The girl was taken back to her home and the police officer was arrested," Ms Lolim explains. "The talk show enables two-way knowledge sharing and helps to address the issues of violence. Communities are now able to hold authorities accountable for anti-social activities during the lockdown."

Women

For women beyond adolescence, issues around domestic violence still figure (as above), and women are actively challenging gender discrimination in public decision-making, too.

Individuals from the Hijra community in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The community has faced increased victimisation, exclusion and economic hardship during the Covid-19 pandemic. © Somporker Noya Setu

Using Covid responses to leverage women's empowerment. Some women tell how they are using the extraordinary circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic as leverage to push for more public-facing roles for themselves and other women. Ms Chesengei and Ms Namalwa of the Mount Elgon, Kenya, area have decided to come out fighting against gender-based discrimination and to confront taboos about women's roles, as they rise to the challenge of the pandemic.

"Every day I arm myself with a face mask and take all hygienic precautions to visit community households and share information and knowledge about the virus. I am now known as, 'Mama Corona' and am very proud of this title, because it recognises my work during a global pandemic," explains Ms Namalwa.[57]

Transgender people

Fundraising from private supporters. Transgender people who face increased ostracisation under the pandemic, and hence poorer access to healthcare and income, have had few places left to turn. Hope and help have come in the form of an international, privately-funded GoFundMe campaign organised by a transgender rights NGO.[58]

The fundraiser garnered the support of academics and private citizens in Dhaka and worldwide. This initiative enabled the organisation, *Somporker Noya Setu* (Bridging New Relationships), to distribute survival funds to 650 hijra people in the space of

three months alone – and the work continues. The NGO has also maintained its promotional campaigns to engender dignity and respect for hijra people so that they may more readily access medical support when they need it.

Enabling actions to support and work with community solutions

→ Engage with and support existing women's rights and transgender rights groups.

→ Train and deploy social workers and/or community activists to raise awareness of girls', women's and transgender people's rights within and across entire communities.

→ Prioritise the provision of formal schooling during the pandemic, recognising the dual educational and safeguarding roles of schools in protecting girls and advancing their development.

→ As a stop-gap measure, consider funding and providing materials to support informal schooling in the community – but this must be by vetted, responsible adults, to ensure children and adolescents are safeguarded.