

# The Effect of Covid-19 Lockdown on Women and Girls in Uganda

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## Abstract

*Women are often the main caregivers in their homes, communities, and health facilities, which puts them at an increased risk of contracting COVID-19 in Uganda and worldwide. This paper analysed the effects of COVID-19 on women and girls in Uganda. The study used a secondary methodology and results indicated that the up paid labour is on increase, working at home, increased risks in homes, increased gender-based violence (GBV), unemployment, diverted routine health services, risk of contracting COVID-19 Virus, psychological wellbeing is affected, increased crime rates, financial stress, increased inequalities, increased exclusive and vulnerabilities among women and girls.*

**Key words:** COVID-19, Women, Girls, Gender Based Violence, Government Interventions and Uganda

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Date of Submission: 02-07-2025

Date of acceptance: 13-07-2025

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## I. BACKGROUND

On March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, Uganda's health officials confirmed the first case of COVID-19 in Uganda. Although border regions take the brunt of COVID-19 cases in Uganda, impoverished slum communities within Kampala continue to struggle to have their basic needs met. In July, as lockdown and curfew protocols began to relax, the effects of the pandemic pressed on. Many families have completely lost their livelihoods, do not have access to proper sanitation measures, and lack adequate health resources and information. These harmful effects most severely impact women and girls thus possessing many challenges (Ssenkaaba, 2020).

As COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread, social issues especially gender inequalities among women and men are on an increase such as gender domestic violence against women in homes, high unemployment rates among women since they have the high percentage (85.6%) in informal sector that has been badly hit by the pandemic, the unique health needs that women and girls have compared to boys such as reproductive health are given less attention during this period leading to maternal mortality and increased rates of adolescent pregnancies among other effects. Such consequences can wipe out decades of gains in women's empowerment if these gender impacts are not solved quickly (Amoako, 2020).

### Effects of COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic

Increased rates of gender-based violence and forced marriages, Lack of sexual and reproductive health resources and education, leading to rising numbers of unintended pregnancy and lack of educational resources and school materials to continue their learning (Ssenkaaba, 2020).

Unpaid work care has increased: The pandemic has increased girls and young women duties of caring for elderly and ill family members as well as for siblings who are out of the school thus giving them less time to attend to homeschooling activities (Farise, 2020).

In the long-run, however, if working from home becomes the norm, more work opportunities may become available to women who often prefer home-based work. In relation to the above the increased caring responsibilities of young girls and women in their homes puts them at more increased risk of contracting COVID-19. In Africa health informal cares responsibilities that are less paid are occupied by women and young. At the same time, over 70% of CEOs and board chairs in global health are men, while just 5% of are women from low- and middle-income countries. Therefore, rendering women to, have little say in the policy measures put in place to address the crisis hence exposing them to bigger risks of suffering the effects of covid-19 (Admin, 2020b).

More to that, the situation has worsened especially in low developed countries like Uganda. We have majority of women's employment that is 70% in the informal economy with few protections against dismissal or

for paid sick leave and limited access to social protection. To earn a living, these workers often depend on public space and social interactions, which are now being restricted to contain the spread of the pandemic. This in the long - run affects the performance of the informal sector. Hence, affecting the financial ability of women (Habib, 2020).

The COVID-19 situation has led to economic issues in families. This has exposed young girls and women at greater risk of exploitation and child labour and gender-based violence, since girls and young women facing severe economic shocks are more likely to take on high-risk work for their economic survival (Global, 2020) .

The pandemic has caused the ministry of Health to divert from routine health services that are meant for women such maternal services among others to health issues caused by the pandemic. This has reduced access of many girls and women to sexual and reproductive health services as well as maternal, new-born and child health services (Girulup, 2020).

Women are often the main caregivers in their homes, communities, and health facilities, which puts them at an increased risk of contracting COVID-19. In the UK, 77% of the NHS workforce and the majority of informal carers are women. More broadly, an analysis of 104 countries revealed that women form 70% of workers in the health and social sectors, and 50% of unpaid carers. At the same time, over 70% of CEOs and board chairs in global health are men, while just 5% of are women from low- and middle-income countries. Although so many women are working on the COVID-19 frontlines, women, therefore, have little say in the policy measures put in place to address the crisis.

Negative effects on the psychological wellbeing of girls and women has been greatly affected during this pandemic as occurrences of violence against women and girls within the household have been reportedly to be on high increase. This is due to male psychological distress due to short-term loss of work and earnings and subsequent violent behavior transferred to their female partners at home during lockdown. As a result, in the long-run women's psychological well-being might be affected even more adversely than men's from financial and emotional stress combined with physical violence (Mugume, 2020).

In addition, women have faced a higher risk of gender-based violence in the COVID-19 outbreak. A recent study by UN Women found that reports of violence against women, and particularly domestic violence, have increased in several countries as security, health, and financial worries create tensions and strains accentuated by the overcrowded and confined living conditions of lockdown (Admin, 2020a).

The closure of schools has resulted into social and economic costs to the society such as increased crime rates, decline in family incomes thus increased rate of sexual abuse and exploitation among young girls, etc (Simon Burgess, 2020).

In addition to the above, due to the financial constraints faced by families, it is likely to force an increasing number of school drop outs especially young women and girls as parents can no longer afford to pay for their education and also there is evidence that many young girls have been exposed to risk of violence such as rape, early marriages, child labour, prostitutions among others that cannot allow them to continue with their studies.

The pandemic is likely to deepen pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems which are in turn intensifying the impacts of the pandemic to women and young girls, as it stated a UN policy brief published in April 2020 that across the globe, women earn less, save less, hold less secure jobs, are more likely to be employed in the informal sector thus exposing them to having less access to social protections and are the majority of single-parent households affected since their capacity to absorb economic shocks is therefore less than that of men making them more dependent on men .

The closure of schools has posed a great impact on girls from vulnerable backgrounds. This is due to the mounting concerns on the impact of these school closures where a number of girls who are living in households living in extreme poverty or conflict, causing highest gender disparities in education (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020).

### **How Uganda government and other stakeholders addressed and/or overlooked their educational needs?**

Policymakers need to incorporate a gender analysis into the development of COVID-19 policies and as the pandemic reveals, hence the need for sex-disaggregated data to fully understand how women and men are affected by the virus.

Introduction of unconditional cash transfers to women bank account holders. This motion is expected to improve the financial and intra-household status of female beneficiaries, as well as their psychosocial well-being. Governments should, therefore, target beneficiaries under as many schemes as possible to ensure maximum reach.

Creating accessible information portals on job availability can help women match with potential employers, especially in urban areas. Since, technology in this situation and period has become the core of our "new normal" and bridging the digital gap can increase girls' and women's chances of accessing education and jobs.

The need to emphasize women's equal representation in all COVID-19 response planning and decision-making. This will give women a chance to front their ideas that affect their lives in the period that later will be considered in developing measures that are gender sensitive hence effective covid -19 responses. Thus, gender-

responsive economic and social policies will be aiming at placing women's economic lives at the heart of the pandemic response and recovery plans.

The need to enhance transformative change for equality by addressing the care economy, paid and unpaid challenges during this COVID-19 pandemic. That is to say, in the formal economy jobs such as care jobs, teaching jobs, nursing jobs among others and these are more occupied by women and are less / under paid compared to jobs occupied by men. and in this pandemic these jobs have been affected so much by the lockdown measures affecting the financial stability of women in the society leading to gender inequalities. Hence, the need for transformative change in order to address the care economy, paid and unpaid challenges.

Target women and girls in all efforts to address the socio-economic impact of COVID-19. It will be important to apply an intentional gender lens to the design of fiscal stimulus packages and social assistance programmes to achieve greater equality, opportunities, and social protection.

The need for policy makers to collaborate with women's rights organizations that will help them get the right information concerning women's needs and they can use it to come up with better policy measures and responses to this crisis caused by the pandemic.

There is need for organizations and humanitarian organizations such as UN to show effective leadership. It is observed that gender equal societies are more prosperous and sustainable than those with deep disparities therefore the need for world's decision makers to have an opportunity to make gender equality a top priority in decisions during this pandemic.

There is need for the government of Uganda to develop post COVID-19 strategic plans for reopening schools, which plans must take into account the needs of girls and young women hence promoting gender equality.

There is need for member states and development partners to continue sharing experiences and best practices during and post the COVID-19 pandemic. This will strengthen the importance of girls and women's education to the development of individual nations and the continent within local communities.

The Ministry of Education should be tracking the numbers of children affected by school closures and provide gender disaggregated data to ensure they can act if a significant number of girls and boys do not return to school.

### **Gender lessons during COVID- 19 Coronavirus Pandemic**

In light of the above situations, the government of Uganda has learnt more key lessons on how to deal with gender issues.

The government of Uganda and development partners on gender issues should acknowledge the need to be more gender inclusive in response plans and put more emphasis in their budget allocation resources aimed at dressing gender issues during and after COVID 19. Such as opening up more violence shelters in every district of the country.

Should make more use of rescue digital and online contacts for critically curbing domestic violence.

Government has also learnt that women through informal sector employment boost the economy of the country therefore should try to advance more interest free loans to the informal and formal women groups to support women entrepreneurs.

During this lock down, government has learnt the great contribution of working women to the development of their families hence the need for government to negotiate with employers to protect jobs occupied by women especially in-service sectors.

Government should learn and understand that pandemics affect women and men differently so it should apply a gender lens system in responses to pandemics like COVID 19.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

As the country averts the spreads of COVID-19 pandemic, it continues to spread, the economic and social relief measures plus fiscal inducement and growth of social safety networks are certainly significant. Though, these measures not only risk intensifying gender disparities but also can spread out decades of improvements in women's empowerment if government does not resolve the subsequent gender impacts. Violence against women (VAW) and girls inclines to the upsurge throughout times of epidemics. For instance, in the entire lockdown, the police registered at least 3328 cases of domestic violence, most of whom are young girls and women. This explains that majority of women are forced to stay at home 'locked down' with their abusers and are at risk of being harshly injured or even murdered. The girls are not attending to school even with the new modes of online education (ODEl) because the parents or guardians cannot afford.

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