

# THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ACT COALITION'S CALL TO GOVERNMENT FOR AN ENGENDERED RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN UGANDA

15th April 2020

## 1.0. OVERVIEW

As the COVID-19 global pandemic continues to hit hard and disrupt the daily lives of women, men and children, governments are under immense pressure to curb further spread of the disease and offer a fast response to avert its devastating consequences to human life and the economy. As the government of Uganda progressively rolls out preparedness, risk reduction and response measures, it's imperative that critical attention is given to the different impacts COVID-19 like all other pandemics and disasters has on women and men.

As already noticed in Uganda, amidst the implementation of the COVID-19 response that includes scale down of government and non-government services, movement restrictions and lock down of businesses, women have continued to shoulder the burden of ensuring the wellbeing and continuity of their families and society at large through working to provide maternal care, child care, elderly care and health care. Women also constitute the majority of cleaners for essential services, workers in super markets, regular markets and provision of social services, most of which have remained open during the lock down.

As the government continues to encourage citizens to stay at home and further enforces a 7:00pm-6:30am curfew, women, men and children find themselves in smaller spaces for longer periods of time under circumstances of economic strain with some families unable to afford two meals a day while others cannot practically maintain social distance. In situations of economic and social stress, women and girls always bear the brunt of things due to the pre-existing gender inequalities that make them susceptible to violence, their unique maternal and reproductive functions, and low status in society. It is no wonder that a rise in cases of violence against women and girls has been realized, with several cases of extreme violence, five (5) of which resulted into death according to the March 31st issue of the New Vision newspaper and others documented by members of the Domestic Violence Act Coalition. Nevertheless, limited prevention and response measures to violence against women and girls have been scaled up during this pandemic.

It is on the above premise therefore, that the Domestic Violence Act Coalition calls upon the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Local Government, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Office of the Prime Minister, Equal Opportunities Commission and all Task Forces at National and District level managing the COVID-19 pandemic to incorporate a gender perspective into the risk reduction and response plan and Standard Operating Procedures (SoPs) to not only achieve better outcomes for women and girls but for everyone. Below are nine (9) recommendations on how this can be achieved:

## 2.0. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AN ENGENDERED COVID-19 RESPONSE IN UGANDA

### 1. Involving women in all decision-making processes

At the forefront of the Ministry of Health COVID-19 response are women and this is highly commendable, however, given the need for a multi sectoral response, women's voices, needs and interests should be reflected at every stage of the decision-making process in all sectors for better outcomes.

**Recommendation:** Deliberate inclusion of women on all task forces and ensuring their constructive participation in decision making processes at all levels in all sectors that form part of the risk reduction and response plans, this will enhance the possibility of having women's practical and strategic needs duly considered and met.

### 2. Scaling up of VAWG prevention and response services

Research from other pandemics and natural or

man-made disasters indicates that violence against women and girls tends to escalate during such times, and due to the strain pandemics have on resources, systems and structures it oftentimes goes unabated. As a result of the COVID19 pandemic, movement has been restricted and citizens have been encouraged to stay home, with many women and girls having to stay with their abusers for even longer periods in confined spaces with no or limited avenues to seek help.

**Recommendation:** That the Child and Family Protection Department of the Uganda Police Force remains operational and is fully equipped with transport, protective gear and a toll-free line to respond to violence against women and girls' cases. The police can work with organizations that operate shelters to provide safety for survivors whose life is at risk in their homes. This should be done in line with the safety guidelines against COVID-19.

**Recommendation:** That the family and children's court is equipped and supported to remain operational as an essential service provider to issue protection orders in emergency cases of domestic violence and relevant relief in child-related matters such as child neglect which is currently sky rocketing. Use of the child help line should also be promoted among communities.

**Recommendation:** That access to medical services for survivors of physical and sexual violence is prioritized and all fees related and incidental to medical examinations and treatment in such cases are waived.

**Recommendation:** That as the government continues to encourage citizens to stay home it ensures that homes are safe for women and girls through media sensitization on prevention of domestic violence and encouraging violence free homes. The sensitization should also include advice on where and how to access support in case of threats of abuse, or actual abuse.

**Recommendation:** That the government encourages community members to exercise vigilance to avert violence against women including reporting to authorities whenever it happens.

### To the Development Partners

**Recommendation:** As donors and development partners continue to support Uganda's COVID-19 response, we implore them to allocate specific funds to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls, and to ensure that programming for prevention and response services is not halted but rather emergency response plans are put in place to meet the safety needs of women and girls.

**Recommendation:** That additional funding or flexibility with the allocated funds is granted to implementing partners to respond to emerging issues of violence against women and girls during this pandemic and allow no cost extensions for planned activities to proceed after the pandemic.

### 3. Distribution of food

The Office of the Prime Minister has embarked on a noble duty to provide food for vulnerable families during this very difficult time and this is highly commendable. There is need to ensure that this does not exacerbate women and girl's vulnerability.

**Recommendation:** That priority is given to female and child headed households as they face exacerbated vulnerability and food is given to individuals rather than households to regulate the unequal power relations within households, reduce women's dependence on men and ensure women have enough to feed their children.

**Recommendation:** That food to female and child headed households be distributed by women responders to prevent abuse, harassment and exploitation of women and girls.

### 4. Support for women in service provision and other essential service providers

As many women continue to serve as front liners during this pandemic, they are exposed to more risk of contracting COVID-19, abuse, sexual harassment and violation of their sexual and reproductive health rights.

**Recommendation:** That special support including incentives in form of subsistence allowances, transport, food, and medical insurance be accorded to women at the front line such as nurses and other emergency response workers to reduce the economic and social strain both at work and home.

**Recommendation:** That measures to prevent sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation of women while on duty be put in place, these can be incorporated within the standard operating procedures guiding the different responses to ensure safety of women and stipulating stringent penalties for non-compliance.

**Recommendation:** That all women at the front line are provided with protective gear and those that are pregnant are enabled to continue accessing maternity services and other necessary sexual and reproductive health services at designated health facilities.

**Recommendation:** A number of security officers both male and female remain operational to enforce the COVID-19 risk reduction measures, many of them have been seen stopping cars and talking to the passengers at close range in addition to physically scrutinizing movement permits. Protective gear should be provided to all officers and other essential service providers to uphold their safety and avert further spread of the disease.

### 5. Women in the informal sector

The informal sector has been disrupted most by the pandemic, this is where majority of women derive sustenance, some women had acquired loans for their businesses and are now faced with rising interest rates and crippled businesses. Some women engaged in the sale of food stuffs have opted to stay at their stalls to ensure business continuity and also adhere to the government guidelines.

**Recommendation:** That government freezes interest rates on all acquired loans for women and men working in the informal sector and puts in place a small-business' rebuilding plan to provide interest free start up packages to revive businesses of this kind at the end of the pandemic.

**Recommendation:** That women who have opted to stay at their stalls in different markets are provided with protective gear and additional security to uphold their safety and security from likely dangers such as sexual violence and robbery. Mechanisms for safe accommodation nearby should also be considered in partnership with hotel or hostel owners.

### 6. Support to the elderly

This pandemic has been proven to take the hardest toll on the elderly, majority of which in Uganda are women and in most cases widows. With the limited movements, support reaching the elderly, many of whom are in the rural areas is very minimal. On the other hand, lack of adequate social security for the elderly in Uganda poses even a greater danger to our elderly women during this pandemic.

**Recommendation:** That the elderly be registered and provided with much needed support in form of food, soap, water and other necessities; and periodic monitoring is conducted by the relevant local government structures to ensure they have the necessities or get necessary emergency support when need arises.

**Recommendation:** That emergency response services for the elderly to access health care are placed at every subcounty to ensure timely provision of much needed support.

### 7. Support to pregnant women, HIV infected persons and persons with disabilities

During this pandemic vulnerable populations are not only at risk of suffering devastating effects if they contract the disease but also having their needs unmet which exposes them to critical danger and violation of their rights.

**Recommendation:** That provision of maternity and sexual and reproductive health services is prioritized and that designated transport for expecting mothers or those due for their antenatal and postnatal appointments to the health facilities is provided, this should include immunization services for babies and toddlers.

**Recommendation:** That persons living with HIV/AIDS majority of which are women and girls are provided with their drugs and adequate food for the entire duration of the lock down and in case of emergencies, transport to health facilities is provided.

**Recommendation:** That streamlined support for persons with disabilities including registration for easy follow up and to ensure they have adequate access to basic necessities such as food, soap, water, health care services during the lockdown period. Measures to ensure they are not subjected to exploitation and abuse should also be put in place for example ensuring that female responders attend to women with disabilities and vice versa.

### 8. Continued dissemination of gender sensitive information on COVID 19 prevention and response.

**Recommendation:** That gender sensitive information on prevention and response to COVID 19 be provided and translated into local languages to enhance the safety of everyone, this will also help to demystify some of the COVID 19 related myths that are on the rise in some communities.

### 9. Access to adequate and clean water

Access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene is critical to prevent further spread of COVID 19 and government's efforts to ensure availability of hand washing stations in public spaces such as markets is highly commendable. However, for majority of rural and semi urban communities, access to safe and clean water is undermined by poor living conditions, distance from water sources and absence of clean or safe water. This is worse for women and children who disproportionately bear the household burden to collect and ensure that households have water.

**Recommendation:** That the government invests in short and long-term avenues to provide safe and potable water for constrained communities in rural and semi urban areas during and after the COVID-19 response.

## 3.0. CONCLUSION

Cognizant of the positive results of the timely measures that the Government of Uganda has progressively implemented to control further spread of COVID-19 so far, we are certain that infusing an engendered approach to the risk reduction and response measures and all standard operating procedures will further strengthen the response and reduce the negative impact the pandemic may have on the Ugandan society.

We therefore, call upon the Government of Uganda and the development partners to consider the above recommendations and take necessary action.

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