

Challenging role of women during disasters: A case of covid-19

Kariwo Edwin and Rugara Tofara
Great Zimbabwe University

Abstract: The study was an attempt assesses the role of women during COVID 19 lockdown. From the findings it has been established that when disasters happen, existing inequalities for women and girls and discrimination intensify. Working women who were operating from home have proved to be in a dilemma of balancing work, mother and wife duties under the same roof. Their reproductive and community linked duties remained critical despite the evolution of the covid-19 pandemic. The informal sector has been hard hit as the majority of the middle as well as lower classes of people sorely rely on it for survival. It was exaggerated by the imposed lockdown condition in order to curb the spread of coronavirus. People were not allowed to go to work, go to the markets, cross borders and or visit the malls or entering town if not among the 'essential service providers'. Female commercial sex workers' tools of their trade as well as their clients were usually found in the public spaces but the rules of the game made a spontaneous turn making them more vulnerable to risky way of business. There is notable increase in domestic violence as social interaction hours in the home have increased which was alien to most working couples. As a result women have suffered the most.

Keywords: Women, Disasters, COVID 19, Gender

I. INTRODUCTION

The covid-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc at individual, societal as well as the national, regional and global level. Many nations continue to succumb to the pandemic, affecting the social, economic, cultural and economic circles worldwide resulting in a redefinition of the way of life of many. Confirmed cases of COVID-19 have exceeded 1.85 million globally, with the death toll surpassing 114,000, according to Johns Hopkins University (JHU). On a similar note over 1.8 million infections are confirmed in at least 185 countries and territories, including more than 114,000 deaths (<https://covid.ourworldindata.org>). Health authorities around the globe continue to scramble to contain the coronavirus pandemic with the United States now caught in the contagion's crosshairs. (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020).

The magnitudes of the outbreak can be felt differently depending on the individual gender relations, however with the common agreement that the enormities are unbearable and as such have far-fetched strategies to curtail it. Despite being home taking care of the sick, playing the mother and wife roles in the home and attending to the community activities as well as fending for the family through the informal enterprising, some women are at formal employment in the humanitarian emergencies in food security, education and child protection which further exposes them to the pandemic

(<https://asiapacific.unwomen.org>). In this study the challenging role of women during disasters will be examined with specific reference to COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe.

Source: The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)

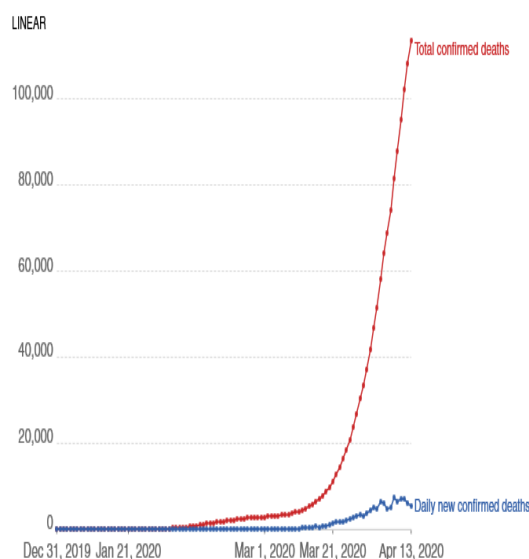


Fig. 1.0 Global confirmed deaths by 13 April 2020 (Source: The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)).

Pre-existing, structural gender inequalities mean that disasters affect women and girls in different ways than they affect boys and men. The vulnerability of females increases when they are in a lower socioeconomic group, particularly in the Global South (Ferris, Petz, and Stark, 2013). The dual burden is complimented by other living factors that are part of their everyday work. Employees including women are working from home in the Covid-19 pandemic except for those in emergencies who have a mandate to save a life. They are expected to put on protective gear and be active in the middle of this world shaker ailment – Covid-19 on the ticket of essential service providers. Women constitute 70 per cent of the workers in the health and social sector globally, and are on the frontlines of the response (<https://asiapacific.unwomen.org>). Within this sector, an average gender pay gap of 28 per cent exists, which may be exacerbated in times of crises. In this regard, women healthcare workers have called attention to their specific needs beyond personal protective equipment, including to meet menstrual hygiene needs. Women are well known to their motherly role, caring and loving in any situation in humankind circle.

This vulnerability impacts preparedness, evacuation, response, number of deaths and recovery. The reasons for

this vulnerability can often be traced to the roles females hold in society and existing gender and cultural norms where they live (Ferris, Petz, and Stark, 2013). This can include the duties women and girls carry out, the clothing they wear, the way they expected to behave. Women and girls are tangled to the triple roles, yet they have fractured the cocoon into unnamed domestic and public sphere roles that further expose them to the gendered nature of disasters. Pandemics, like all public health crises, are inherently gendered phenomena, COVID-19 being no exception. Despite existing research highlighting critical links between gender and health emergencies, outbreak preparedness and response efforts remain largely gender-blind, and the gendered nature of pandemics such as the current COVID-19 crisis is consequently left unexplored and without effective interventions (Sini, 2020). In her view, Sini Ramo propounded that not only are women, men and people with non-binary identities affected differently by COVID-19, the longer-term impact of the crisis will continue to exacerbate and re-produce gendered inequalities across the globe.

Policies and public health efforts have not addressed the gendered impacts of disease outbreaks (<https://asiapacific.unwomen.org>). The response so far to Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) seems to be affiliating to that system. In this view, UN Women (2020) posits that the closure of schools to control COVID-19 transmission in China, Hong Kong, Italy, South Korea, and beyond might have a differential effect on women, who provide most of the informal care within families, with the consequence of limiting their work and economic opportunities. On the same note, Sini (2020) added that women perform three times as much unpaid care work at home as men, taking care of domestic chores and nursing sick family members, being exposed to greater health risks. The extra burden caused by the closures of schools and nurseries falls largely on women. The scenario has sprouted to the global south where homebased care is hinged on women and girls despite their positions in the society they live in. Travel restrictions in Zimbabwe since borders have been closed, cause financial challenges and uncertainty for mostly female cross border traders, many of whom travel to South Africa, Dubai, Botswana, Tanzania and many more neighbouring counties. It is against this background that a study was conducted on the challenging role of women during disasters with specific reference to Covid-19 outbreak.

II. OBJECTIVES

- How are women and girls affected during times of disasters
- Why are women more affected by disasters than men?
- How can women challenges be addressed?

III. METHODOLOGY

This research adopted applied a qualitative approach. The study involved data gathering through telephone in which adolescent girls and young mothers who were located in the Epworth were targeted. A total sample of 20 women were selected using snowballing sampling. Data was collected

through the mobile phones since participants were not readily available due to Corona virus lock down condition. Participants were classified according to the different operations or categories (employed women including those in humanitarian field who are at work as essential services providers, non-formal education adolescent girls doing a second chance form of education and life skills through Plan International in Zimbabwe, girl students who have stopped going to school due to covid-19 pandemic lockdown directive by the president of Zimbabwe, women volunteers in the Supporting Adolescent Girls Education (SAGE) project including those with disabilities. The interview method for this research, typically, involved mobile devices since there were no face to face interaction with the participants. The research also used skype interviews for those who had access. The interview questions were in English but there were impromptu translation during the interviews as participants were asked about the language of choice during the process. Data recorded during the dialogues was later analysed to determine whether the study was useful in providing a clear picture of the realities of women in the corona virus era.

IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The study sought to find out the challenges faced by women during disasters with specific reference to the covid-19 era. Interviews were carried with participants over the phone due to the demand for social distancing as a way of preventing Coronavirus. The findings obtained were presented in direct quotes and summaries thereafter a close analysis was made. Themes and subthemes were used to guide this section.

4.1 Domestic violence

The study sought to find out how women and men were affected by disasters with specific reference to covid-19 outbreak. Several responses were obtained from participants indicating that women and girls were really affected by the pandemic. Some notable responses include the following:

"There has been a rise in domestic violence women being victims as a result of being home always. Being home always has been a fault finding exercise hence this brought more conflicts some being fatal and intractable"

A second respondent reiterated that

"We hear couples fighting due to lack of activity and shortage of resources at home".

The submissions given above demonstrate that outbreak of domestic violence increased due to the lockdown as a result of covid-19 outbreak. Couples would spend the greater part of the day at work and less time at home hence some unusual audits will be done.

A third respondent claimed that:

"In my area the Covid-19 era has seen marriages being shaken. Abuse cases are high and so far 2 domestic violence deaths have been recorded and in both cases the women died. That's bad"

The responses obtained demonstrate that women and girls were vulnerable. During disasters like the global disaster currently threatening human life women and girls in home were prone to abuse by men. Cases of domestic violence were high in most families as couples spend time at home during the COVID era. The lockdown restricted human movement from one place to the other hence families remained indoors until the end of lockdown which was unpredictable.

4.2 Women in the informal sector

Most families are sustained by informal markets run by women. Women respondents emphasised that informal trade brought food on the table as salaries given by most organisations were unsustainable.

One respondent claimed that

"This break was just but too abrupt, we were not given time to do some savings. We were told the government was going to pay us but unfortunately nothing is coming forward. Families might starve to death because remember some of them couldn't manage to stock food because they live on hand to mouth so this one is indeed a serious issue".

Families are starving and the situation has just turned bad as of now. Even after the lockdown we cannot get into business we no longer have starting capital. The situation was bad largely affecting women population who were into this business and also taking daily needs of families. Some were single mothers, some widows etc with a burden to take care of the family. It can be noted from the submissions made above that women were real challenged as their source of income and living was destroyed. Informal trade was the main activity sustaining livelihood especially in urban areas due to lack of employment. Women took the burden and maintained families from the little obtained from such informal businesses.

In addition most were involved in village Savings and Loans (*mikando*) on a daily or weekly basis helping families cope with demands of the day. In order to bring food on the table women has been innovative. Most men would not bother to check whether the family had enough in stock for consumption hence this has been regarded as a famine role. The markets in same vein had been feminised the same applied to *mikando* and groceries schemes. It is in light of this that the role of women cannot be underestimated and it has been compromised as a result of covid-19 outbreak.

Those engaged in the old profession of commercial sex work also made their submissions in this study. They revealed that they can no longer scout for potential customers. All public places have been closed including bars where most patrons would come to pick them.

"Tapinda munzara mwana wamai ndiro basa rondiraramisa kunyangwe kunezvirewe zvino zvavharwa hatichaziva todii. Vamwe have vane maclients ava gara nayo vari pakanaka vanotaura paphone votsvaga kutii vodii. Asi hatisi tese tine maclients akadaro".

The respondent above indicated that sex workers were booted out of business by Covid 19 lockdown. There were

left with no survival option but rather starve with their families as they solely relied on sex work. The respondent however went further and explained that there were some who had contacts for their seasonal clients. Such a category of sex workers were a bit safe since there were in a position of linking with their clients. The revelations made suggest that sex work was a source of livelihood for other families. In view of this it can be noted that such women faced uncertain future and struggled to meet their daily demands. While we do not encourage commercial sex work we will all agree that some families are surviving through it. Prostitution has been an activity to raise income and it remains viable for some families.

4.3 Accommodation crisis in urban areas

Through interviews it was established that accommodation challenges haunted most women in urban areas. This is demonstrated by the following responses obtained:

Just thinking hangu of some families who stay in a 1 room let's say it's a family of four, that is Mai baba a son n a daughter, in that 1 room vanga vasina kujaira kuspender like the whole day varimo imomo, maybe bcz vaisimbomukira kuChikoro baba voenda kuMbare to hustle n they meet manheru, but now vakuswera vese vari 4 mu1 room 24/7 maybe muskana is a teenager in her adolescence maybe she is on her monthly periods , imagine 3 or 4 days dzekuperiod muri mu1room uchada kuchinja pad etc apa mukuswera mese it's just disgusting n obvious the girl will be uncomfortable.

It can be noted from the submissions made that most women were challenged by lack of proper accommodation in urban areas. It is indeed difficult to have adequate accommodation. More woes came during this break when all family members were forced to be home during day and night. During normal working days all residents will move out during the day and some during the night hence creating space for each other in homes. Rented accommodation was expensive hence most families could not afford the rentals.

4.4 Domestic chores

A number of women interviewed revealed that this was an opportunity to away with dirty in their homes as no one was going out. Another woman said:

"We would help each as the family to clean our houses and yards which lacked attention for some time due to competing interests".

It can be noted that some working mothers admitted it was time to do a thorough clean up. Most of these women had no time to address the issues due to nature of their duties and sometimes went to school in a bid to further their studies. Another middle aged lady claimed that it was a moment of adjusting and readjusting, introspection and reflection. Somehow our lifestyles were changed as a result of corona virus outbreak. The submissions demonstrate that most women had enough time to adjust their lifestyles

V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study sought to identify the challenges faced by women during disasters with special reference to the COVID 19 era.

Covid 19 represents a global challenge which needs to be monitored in order to safeguard human survival. Zimbabwe like any other countries was threatened by the disease declared a 21day lockdown which was further extended by 14 days. While the lockdown was declared the gendered impacts of this break was not taken into account. Much emphasis was on social distancing without gender in mind. The pandemic has rendered women and girls more vulnerable and exposed (UNFPA COVID-19 Report, 2020).

A number of women were interviewed and made submissions clear. Women faced a number of challenges as compared to men. Domestic violence was on the rise in families. An assumption was made that the home could be safe during this period for both men and women but that was not the case. Common restrictions on the mobility of women, for example, meant that women were less likely to get emergency information in time, and were less able to escape from affected areas (Climate Change Cell 2009; del Ninno et al. 2001). The need to have a police clearance or pass was an uphill struggle to most women when they did not have reasons for the provision of essential services. Essential services in the country have not included going to the market to buy some grocery or other things for resale despite that it was a source of livelihood for many women in the informal sector.

Women and girls were restricted to the home and have nowhere to go after experiencing abuse which has become prevalent in the home. It makes sense when one would say not all homes were safe. Some homes were violent homes, women and girls have no escape during the lockdown. The Guardian (2020) admits that 90% of causes of violence relate to COVID -19. Women and girls failed to fend for families due to the lockdown, they were no longer had access to the market which was the source of livelihood for most families. This subjected women to a lot of pressure at home on how best the family needs were to be met. The market was the source of livelihood not necessarily for women but the rest of the family. In addition to the informal business activities women mobilised resources through *mikando* which contributed to family income and made life sustainable. It can be noted that women livelihood strategies were not sustainable. Women remained vulnerable and got challenged on a big note.

Women have an important role to maintain the livelihood of the household, including if there is a change in their family's livelihood and the environment (Fajarwatia et al ,2015). Although women's social space was limited to the home and for the reproduction of their work, then women were also asked to represent the image of purity, of surrender and obedience, the reality is different, however. The findings obtained revealed that the contributing factors to the marginalization of women and girls resulted from the triple burden of combining production responsibilities, household chores and care responsibilities, and community care work (Alvarez, 2014). This has been evidenced especially in times of such disasters like covid-19 that has resulted in a lockdown. Choice of types work undertaken by women could not be separated from domestic obligations as their primary responsibility. Some women choose to do

productive activities in their home environment because these activities do not interfere with their primary duties (Karikari, 2015).

Murray and Myers (2006) observed that African city life has been reduced to a dystopian nightmare manifested by limited opportunities for formal employment, a lack of decent and affordable housing, failing and neglected infrastructure, the absence of social services, pauperization, criminality and increased inequalities. Due to these flaws, cities in Africa and the developing world are considered structurally irrelevant in the realm of world cities and attract hardly any global investment (Robinson 2002). Epworth community in Zimbabwe is characterised by a hive of activities since it falls under peri-urban settlements with low to medium income earners. In the covid-19 lockdown era, almost all the survival avenues in terms livelihoods, small scale informal business, market gardening, piece jobs were put to a halt. Further, key decisions concerning preparedness and adaptation strategies are often left to men, with women excluded from decision making processes (Cronin et al. 2004). Men, by virtue of being key participants in the public sphere had access to information and services that can minimise the impact of Covid-19 pandemic to the day to day survival of women, men and children. Women were set to be hit hardest by the Covid-19 impacts, as they made up a 'disproportionate percentage' of workers in the informal sector (UN Women).

VI. CONCLUSION

The study was conducted on gendered impact of disasters with specific reference to COVID -19 break which was adopted globally. It can be concluded that gendered impact of this undertaking was not considered. Women and girls were rendered vulnerable during the period. Cases of domestic violence rose due to the need to be home during the lockdown. It can be concluded that not all homes were safe and women had no escape during the period. In a bid to escape they were exposed and again harassed by law enforcement agents hence cycle of vulnerability remained with them. Women and girls also fend for families through informal business which had become the lifeblood of most families. Employment in Zimbabwe was scarce hence women were into selling to sustain families. In view of this women were under pressure to make families survive. Some women who were also into prostitution can no longer make hence can no longer make it as a result of Covid 19 lockdown. It can thus be concluded that the lockdown adopted destroyed the livelihood of most families and women and girls were desperately in need of assistance. Social assistance was required in both urban and rural areas. The nature of accommodation in urban areas for those in rented apartment had increased pressure on women and girls. It was noted one or two families were in one room or crowded in a small area and there were forced to spend the whole day until the lockdown was over at home. This was practically impossible as women and girls needed privacy as compared to men. Accommodation crisis was indeed a challenge in urban areas and this was exacerbated by COVID-19 lockdown with an unpredictable end. It can however be noted that whatever action was taken was

necessary as the COVID-19 pandemic represented a global challenge.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the above conclusions, the study made the following recommendations:

- Future analysis and planning towards disasters to involve both men and women and assess potential gendered impacts of any undertaking.
- Women led emergency preparedness, response and prevention was needed.
- The government through its appropriate structures and NGOs should concietise both women and girls on the need to report cases of domestic violence in homes.
- It was of paramount importance to consider the dual burden of women and girls in disaster management by government and other stakeholders.
- The reproductive roles of women cannot be overemphasized therefore should be considered before the decision to harmonize resources for disaster response.
- When disasters like the current covid-19 happens, the roles of women both in formal and informal, domestic or public spheres changes, hence response should be coined in a way that balances the gender disparities. Volume of household work increases with almost the same proportion.

- Policies need to consider the different needs and priorities of women of different cultures, geographical location, age, employment and educational status before coming up with a ‘one size fits all policy’. Planning for women, without them is ultimately planning to fail.... Anne Tickner (2008) asserts that “we cannot generalise about women because they have different experiences of subordination.

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