POLICY ADVISORY

To Declare Sexual Gender Based Violence (SGBV) Response & Women’s Health Needs As Essential Services Within COVID-19 & Other Pandemics

Supported by MacArthur Foundation
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TO DECLARE SEXUAL GENDER BASED VIOLENCE (SGBV) RESPONSE AND WOMEN’S HEALTH NEEDS AS ESSENTIAL SERVICES WITHIN COVID-19 AND OTHER PANDEMICS

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Way Forward
Nigeria is currently working to contain the spread of the Coronavirus as well as implementing its responses to the impact of total and partial lockdown across the country. On 29 March 2020, President Muhammadu Buhari ordered the cessation of movement for residents of FCT, Lagos and Ogun State. The President acknowledged that the restrictions will impose hardship.

From experience, it is our opinion that in these circumstances it will be more difficult for women to seek help or escape from abusive relationships particularly where they live with the abusive partner during the lockdown. Equally worrisome is that children are also open to more violence and will need protection during this period.

To this end, WRAPA deems it right that women should have support and protection services available and accessible so that they are shielded from the risks of transferred aggression in their homes. Focused sensitization and information on essential services are important for women and other marginalized groups who may be in violent situations arising in family settings, neighborhoods or from the actions or inactions of other state and non-state actors.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Nigeria is currently working to contain the spread of the Coronavirus as well as implementing its responses to the impact of total and partial lockdown across the country. On 29 March 2020, President Muhammadu Buhari ordered the cessation of movement for residents of FCT, Lagos and Ogun State. The President acknowledged that the restrictions will impose hardship.

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The Nigeria legal system is plural: there is statutory and Sharia law in the Northern zones coexisting with customary law in rural areas. The simultaneous application of this three-tier system creates varied degrees of protection for the rights of women and children. The country has an active federalist political system: and both the federal and state governments have the prerogative to pass laws affecting women and children.

The federal government of Nigeria has ratified multiple international laws and conventions to address the historical discrimination and marginalization of women and girls including GBV (Al-Kyari et all, 2018). Examples includes (1) the Child’s Rights Act of 2003 which provides for detailed protection of a girl child until age 18, seeks to end forced labor and child marriages and is aimed at ensuring health services for pregnant women; (2) the convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) ratified in June 1985: (3) the protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) ratified December 16, 2004, and (4) the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act which was finally passed in 2005, more than 10 years after it was first presented to the National Assembly.

In 1995, the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development (FMWASD) was created to provide an institutional home to address women’s issues. The 1999 Nigerian constitution chapter IV, section 42 (1), (a) and (b): (2): and (3) prohibits discrimination based on gender, religion, ethnicity, age or circumstances of birth. The first National Women Policy was drafted in 2000 followed by the National Gender Policy of 2006. They both aimed to make Gender equality a driver of growth, promote health, survival and freedom from violence and create an inclusive society devoid of gender discrimination.

The National Plan of Action, which has a five-year target period (2014-2019) includes a comprehensive strategy for delivering the National Gender Policy (FMWASD 2008). The FMWASD also developed a national referral pathway that identifies stakeholders in each state for the referral of GBV cases.

Against this background, and drawing from the findings under the MacArthur Foundation X-Grant funded research by Partners West Africa Nigeria, (PWAN) and WRAPA under the same grant, this Policy and Practice Advisory is articulated to address the following policy priority areas:

1. The Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Health as it affects women and girls
2. GBV (deepening of economic and social stress and spike in GBV, help & support to survivors)
3. Design of fiscal stimulus packages and social assistance programmes as it affects women
GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to these identified risks and challenges, WRAPA calls on Governments at all levels to:

1. Declare SGBV and other response services emergency services during pandemic situations to help protect women’s rights and keep them safe from abuse.
2. Designate and strengthen Gender Desks and family support units within police departments and other department of governments;
3. Ensure that the family support Units and Gender Desks are provided with effective telephone hotlines that persons with disabilities and vulnerable citizens can report domestic violence or any other gender-based violence and get immediate help;
4. Ensure that within and beyond this COVID-19 crisis, support resourcing and access are extended to organizations responding to domestic violence to provide assistance, including shelter, counselling and legal aid to SGBV survivors.
5. Expand the capacity of shelters for victims of violence by re-purposing other spaces, such as hotels, education institutions, private businesses to accommodate;
6. Expand and improve telecommunication services to accommodate the provision of online social services. This will include the provision of permits to the essential service provider to reach residents within their locality.
7. Designating discrete safe spaces for women where they can report abuse without alerting perpetrators, e.g., in grocery stores or pharmacies close to their location.
8. Expand the capacity of shelters for victims of violence by re-purposing other spaces, such as hotels, education institutions, private businesses to accommodate quarantine needs, and integrating considerations of accessibility for all.
9. Promote increased and improved partnership between private business and organizations providing essential services on the front line of response.
10. Stepping up advocacy and awareness campaigns, including targeting men at home for reorientation through online media during pandemic situations.
11. Ensure representation of women in the design of palliatives or other interventions that alleviate the sufferings of women.
1. Women bore the brunt of the lockdown and attendant issues, thus their inclusion in decision making towards addressing the effects of the pandemic and other social issues.
2. Put a ban on layoffs to protect women and other vulnerable citizens and to mitigate the effects of the crisis on the economy during and beyond pandemics.
3. Postpone the payment of rent for public properties for six months during pandemics.
4. Provide support to women through incentives to the girl child, such as continued school feeding programmes and adapt them to the crisis context by preparing rations for delivery or pick-up if there are no imposed restrictions.
5. Identify strategies to migrate referral and response services online and real-time;
6. Rediscount credit worth a certain amount, targeting women goods and services importers to increase their access to finances and support their employment during pandemics.
7. Intensify social intervention programmes like funds allocated to women traders, female artisans and grassroots women with adequate monitoring for accountability.
8. Private businesses owned by women such as restaurants, hotels, coffee shops, performance and entertainment and sports services should be exempted from tax for a year during pandemic situations. These companies employ mostly low-paid and low-skilled staff with a high percentage being women;
9. Provide unpaid family caregivers during and beyond the lockdown restrictions with the support and equipment necessary to do their jobs safely at home.
11. Providing support to women through incentives to the girl child, such as continued school feeding programmes and adapt them to the crisis context by preparing rations for delivery or pick-up; if there are no imposed restrictions.

a) Lack of data on the population and economic levels made the issue of what to purchase and who to empower difficult, giving room to diversion of the palliatives to wrong hands as well as giving out same items to all regardless of whether you were a rural farmer or city dweller. People needs differ.

b) The shared palliatives were not gender sensitive as the packages were devoid of critical needs of women such as sanitary pads, diapers, baby formula, enough food for breastfeeding mothers (many of whom were hungry during the lockdowns), disinfectant, soap, Vitamin C, Paracetamol, etc.

c) Until there is a shift in the attitude of those who govern the affairs of state Nigerians will continue to find it difficult to trust government policies and programmes.
With more knowledge about effective epidemic control strategies emerging across nations, there is need for the Nigerian Government to review and revise its emergency response policies to align with the lived experiences and needs and rights of citizens in order to reduce the rate and level of hardship on citizens especially, women and girls amongst major vulnerable groups.

Nigeria’s route to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and post COVID-19 recovery from attendant impacts can be achieved by a careful reappraisal of current governance styles to streamline the needs of the vulnerable target group of women into development as well as government and community policies.

**Thematic Issue 1:**

**Mainstreaming Gender in COVI-19 Pandemic Responses**

**Key Recommendations:**

1. Reinforce a gender-sensitive response to the pandemic, including having a gender-focal person on all response committees.
2. Prioritize women as beneficiaries of palliatives and stimulus package, including at-risk women population such as pregnant women, widows, breadwinners, PLWD, PLWHIV/AIDS, etc.
3. In all COVID-19 awareness programs, include targeted information on prevention of gender-based violence.
4. Provide ‘passes’ to GBV responders and service providers, while directing response services, such as shelters and counselling centers, as ‘essential.’

**Thematic issue 2:**

**Safeguarding Frontline medical and non-medical workers**

**Key Recommendations:**

1. Mitigate risks of infections and deaths by providing Personal Protective Equipment and every other necessary protective materials for all frontline workers.
2. Provide commensurate hardship allowance, as well as insurance cover for all frontline workers and their immediate family members.
3. The Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 should collaborate with relevant medical associations to ensure standard best practice is maintained in the proper use and disposal of PPEs, among other operations.
**Thematic Issue 3:**

**Transparency and Accountability**

**Key Recommendations:**

1. Provide periodic updates to the general public on all COVID-19 funds, as well as details of disbursements.
2. Establish an independently-managed tracking and monitoring process that ensures foolproof measures are in place to block financial loopholes while curbing possible fraud and financial misappropriation.
3. As a whistle-blowing approach, government, together with CSOs, should introduce toll-free lines for reporting corruption cases on COVID-19 funds and palliatives.
4. Empower the EFCC and ICPC to identify, investigate, and promptly prosecute persons found guilty of COVID-19 related financial crimes.

**Thematic Issue 4:**

**Strategy for Lockdowns and Curfews**

**Key Recommendations:**

1. Introduce short- and medium-term plans to cushion the economic impact of the pandemic on the people.
2. Prioritize better data collection and poverty mapping through existing community, religious, and traditional structures.
3. Provide regular, not one-off, distribution of palliatives, particularly food and/or cash transfers to the poor.
4. The legislative arm should consider quick Bills aimed at alleviating people’s sufferings during and post pandemic.

**Thematic Issue 5:**

**Disproportionality and Access to Essential Services**

**Key Recommendations:**

1. Conduct disaggregated data assessment of vulnerable and at-risk populations, and develop response strategies to suit their intersectional and unique needs.
2. Proactively reduce possible spread of the virus among clustered populations, such as IDPs and refugees’ camps, by putting measures in place for testing, response, and prevention.
3. Grant ‘Passes’ and designate as ‘essential’ Centers that provide support services to at-risk and vulnerable populations, such as widows, elderly, persons living with disability, and people living with HIV/AIDS.
4. Establish measures to ensure education continue for all school-age children, especially girls, while not leaving behind those with limited or no access to technology.
**Thematic Issue 6:**

**Composition of the Presidential Task Force (PTF)
Key Recommendation:**
1. Expand the composition of the PTF to include key groups such as women, youth, CSOs, and persons living with disability

**Thematic Issue 7:**

**Standardization
Key Recommendations:**
1. Develop Standard Operating Procedures for all key COVID-19 response operations and actions
2. Conduct periodic experts review and projections of the spread of COVID-19 at national, state, and local levels so as to proactively galvanize stakeholders for quick actions.
3. Emplace standard and practice and protocols on regularly sanitizing and fumigating isolation centers, designated hospitals, public places, and other key areas.
4. Set up drive-through/walk-in/mobile testing units and first-responder units especially in low income neighborhoods, as well as hand-washing points in public places such as markets, transport stations, etc.

**Thematic Issue 8:**

**Human Rights, Safety, and Security
Key Recommendations:**
1. Set up protocols that ensure all response strategies and the National Human Rights Commission and CSOs scrutinize actions through human rights lens.
2. Improve security and safety of all people, at all times and in all places.
3. Monitor and investigate human rights abuses by state and non-state actors, while ensuring prompt prosecution and adequate punishment of perpetuators.
4. Train and sensitize law enforcement agents on best practice in enforcing lockdowns, such that does not violate human rights.