

COVID-19

GNWP Mitigation and Adaptation Strategy and Appeal

October 2020

Country Update

Uganda

Context and government response:

As of October 19, 2020, Uganda has registered over 10,590 cases of COVID-19, and 97 deaths. The Ministry of Health has been progressively identifying high-risk individuals (including travelers) and placing them under institutional quarantine or self-isolation. The Ministry has also been tracing contact of those with confirmed COVID-19 and expanding testing. Other preventative and early containment measures taken by the Ugandan government include the closure of schools, restrictions on internal and international travel, use of hand sanitizer, improved handwashing stations, social distancing, and lockdown, among others.

During the 75th UN General Assembly, the Lancet COVID-19 Commission listed Uganda as the best country in Africa in terms of suppressing the Covid-19 pandemic in the month of August.

Summary of impact:

While the outbreak of COVID-19 has been positively low, the response to COVID-19 and the preventative measures imposed by the government have had grave socio-economic effects. Research reveals that lockdown measures have reduced business activity by more than 50% – with micro and small business economic activities hardest hit. The policy measures – including a ban on the sale of non-food items in Ugandan markets – are disproportionately impacting women – who are overrepresented among market sellers and in the informal economy. The Uganda Women Network expressed “grave concerns” over excessive force and police brutality against informal workers, including women, who continue to sell goods.

Due to deeply entrenched traditional gender norms, women and girls in East Africa are among the most vulnerable groups exposed to the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. As frontline workers and primary caregivers in health facilities and in homes, women are more directly exposed to the virus. They face additional burdens of unpaid domestic work (an average of around 4 hours per day) due to lockdown measures and school closures, and at the same time, are at higher risk of income and job loss. GNWP’s civil society partners in Uganda are reporting increased incidences of domestic violence and abuse faced by women due to lockdown measures - at least two women were killed as a result of domestic violence in Lamwo.

In the context of the pandemic, communal conflict – including fatal violence between cattle rustlers from Sudan and Karamoja and populations along the border of Agago, Kitgum, Pader, and the Kamwo districts – has continued and escalated, threatening an already fragile population. Participants of a research carried out by GNWP with support from UN Women and the Government of Ireland also pointed out that land disputes have increased during the pandemic. This may be exacerbated by the financial instability brought by COVID-19.

One Focus Group Discussion participant recalled that “a widow was killed in Lamora parish Amida sub county Kitgum District by her in-laws because of land conflicts. They knew that she went to court and won the case and the police had arranged to come and show the land demarcations. She was attacked and killed with an axe when she was coming from town back home to the village.”

In focus group discussion (FGD) with women peacebuilders in Uganda, participants reported that the implementation of Uganda's 3rd National Action Plan (2020-2024), developed in close consultation with Ugandan civil society, has been delayed by COVID-19. "Coordination for WPS implementation has deteriorated during the pandemic", according to GNWP research participants from Uganda. They emphasized that while there was strong coordination and information sharing about the new National Action Plan at the national level before COVID-19, there is very little information available now. They attributed it to COVID-19 making both communication and coordination more difficult due to limited access of some women peacebuilders to technology needed for digital communication, and the shift of focus and resources away from WPS implementation and towards immediate health and humanitarian response, as discussed in more detail below. One of the FGD participants noted, “I heard about the WPS this year, but most young women do not know about this, and how they can use the resolutions.” She emphasized that this challenge – which has been exacerbated by COVID-19 – is a barrier to implementation because “people cannot implement what they do not know.”

Several other risks threaten to worsen the COVID-19 outbreak in Uganda, including on-going conflict and violence, and lack of access to basic needs - especially in rural and refugee-hosting communities.

In rural communities, the lack of clean water, lack of basic medication, and increased food insecurity (due to locusts which are destroying crops), are all contributing to increasing women's security risk and their exposure to the disease by having to travel many kilometers by foot to access water and other basic needs. GNWP's partners have reported that about 600 persons with disabilities, including 300 blind persons, living in the districts of Busia and Isingiro are facing life-threatening challenges in accessing food due to lockdown measures. In addition, due to the national ban on public transportation, persons with pre-existing health conditions or specific needs face increased challenges in accessing life-saving health treatment. For example, persons living with HIV/AIDS in rural communities are unable to access antiretroviral (ARV) HIV drugs; and the movement restriction measures have also limited women's access to sexual and reproductive health clinics, causing the death of a woman in labor who was not able to access maternal healthcare.

Responses led by women peacebuilders:

GNWP's local partners in Uganda report that women peacebuilders are facing extraordinary challenges in their work, including resource mobilization. Funding has been shifted to emergency health and humanitarian response, and peacebuilding programmes are being neglected. As a participant in a FGD conducted by GNWP stated, "We are not prioritizing peacebuilding right now. Most of the funds are focused on COVID-19 [humanitarian] response."

Despite this, local civil society organizations and women's rights groups are leading working committees ranging from market surveillance, resource mobilization, handling cases domestic and land cases of sexual and gender-based violence and conducting community-level sensitization. The CSO's Women's National Task Force on COVID-19 is also spearheading a data collection process to gather informative evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on women's rights organizations' operations and the communities they work in, from a gender perspective.