

## Country Update

# South Africa

(February 16, 2021)

### Context and government response:

As of February 16, 2021, South Africa has registered 1,492,909 cases of COVID-19, including 48,094 deaths. Once the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in South Africa in March 2020, the President Ramaphosa invoked his disaster management powers and imposed a full national lockdown with strict restrictions which lasted over 100 days. Although South Africa remains the most heavily affected country on the African continent, government statistics indicate that some safe COVID-19 practices have been adopted by the population, as mask-wearing increased from 49% to 74% and hand-sanitiser use from 10% to 35% between May and August 2020. As of late December 2020, the country went into lockdown again as the second wave of COVID-19 cases surged, largely driven by a newly identified and more transmissible variant of the coronavirus.

Civil society representatives who participated in focus group discussions organized by GNWP agreed that women have not been sufficiently included in decision-making around COVID-19 response. Although women Ministers have been included at the national level, women peacebuilders, civil society and representatives of vulnerable groups at the grassroots level were not consulted. The Commission for Gender Equality was also not consulted in the implementation of COVID-19 measures to ensure that they are gender-responsive.

### Summary of impacts:

*“COVID-19 has given rise to gender-based violence and femicide, food shortages, tensions in communities, economic hardships, and more inequalities in access to internet” - Quote from*

*Representative of the Lady of Peace Community Foundation, a coalition of women's rights organizations in South Africa*

COVID-19 and the related lockdown measures have had devastating socioeconomic impacts in South Africa. According to the Lady of Peace Community Foundation (LOPECO), a coalition of over 20 women's rights organizations, there has been an increase in food insecurity during the COVID-19 lockdown. This is in line with the findings of the National Income Dynamics Study, in which 47% of interviewed adults reported that their household did not have enough money to buy food in April 2020, and 21% reported that at least one person in their household went hungry in the past 7 days between May and June 2020. The food insecurity was aggravated by the inability of civil society organizations to carry out their operations. LOPECO usually provides food to around 400 children in local villages, but they were unable to deliver food due to lockdown measures. Women living in rural areas have been particularly vulnerable to food insecurity due to COVID-19. According to one participant of the focus group discussion organized by GNWP, black women and families have been disproportionately exposed to food insecurity as a result of systemic discriminations in policies on land ownership.

Women in South Africa have been more vulnerable to the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic due to a number of factors. According to a study on Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19 in South Africa conducted by UNDP, "households headed by casually employed, black African women, who had not completed secondary education, had a 73.5% chance of falling into poverty due to the coronavirus lockdown." This was also validated by participants of focus group discussions organized by GNWP, who noted that during COVID-19 lockdown women who work in the informal sector were not able to receive government support and grants, because they were not registered for unemployment benefits. Many women from rural communities, who work as street vendors or domestic workers lost their jobs, have been unable to provide for their families. The results of a national survey conducted by the NIDS-CRAM project in May and June 2020 revealed that in the period of February to April 2020, employment fell by approximately 1.9 million jobs or 22% for women, whereas it fell only by 10% for men. In South Africa, the gender gap in employment increased during this lockdown period, since women constituted two-thirds of those that lost their jobs according



to the study. Moreover, participants noted that women immigrants have been particularly affected. They were excluded from government support because of their immigration status.

There has been a sharp increase in domestic violence cases during the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular due to lockdown measures, which confined many women with their abusive partners. In South Africa, the increase in the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) was depicted by a sharp rise in cases received by the government's GBV and femicide command centre, as it recorded more than 120,000 victims in the first three weeks of lockdown, with more than 500 to 1,000 calls per day. There are also concerns surrounding the under-reporting of cases, since, according to a woman activist interviewed by GNWP, women have been afraid to report cases of sexual and domestic violence, because of strict lockdown measures and police brutality in enforcing them. According to the interviewee, there have been cases of women who went to a police station to report domestic violence and were arrested for violating lockdown measures. Amnesty International reports that South Africa COVID-19 has not integrated considerations of support services for women and girls subjected to GBV in the design of its COVID-19 response.

**Responses led by women peacebuilders:**

Lockdown measures and mobility restrictions have made it difficult for women-led organizations to carry out their work. They were unable to access their beneficiaries – for example, organizations that work with victims of sexual violence or provide legal assistance to women in jail were not able to stay in touch with some of their beneficiaries, as they did not have access to the phone or internet. However, many women-led organizations that work with trauma healing, support to sexual violence victims and mental health support have used their existing networks and databases to mobilize and mitigate the gendered impacts of COVID-19 in their communities. They worked to identify the most vulnerable families during the COVID-19 lockdown and provided them with food packages or food vouchers.

Bana Ba Ba Khanya Center, a women-led mental health support organization, has distributed food parcels to vulnerable families in its network, as many of them lost jobs, but were not eligible to receive unemployment benefits. They established a partnership with a supermarket chain, which donated food that they then distributed. Black Womxn Caucus also distributed food packages in vulnerable communities – in total, packages were delivered to



120 families in informal settlements. They also distributed second-hand clothes and sanitary pads for women and girls. LOPECO has also created a WhatsApp platform, where it holds regular dialogues about the gendered impacts of COVID-19, and in particular the impact on gender-based violence and on peacebuilding in local communities. They also distributed food parcels and health masks in orphanages and schools in the Northwest villages.

The Center for Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV), a peacebuilding organization that also provides psychosocial support to victims of gender-based violence, continued its counselling services during lockdown. They set up a toll free phone line, through which survivors of violence could reach trained counsellors, social workers and clinicians. They established referral systems to direct victims of violence to lawyers, shelters, and other necessary services. They also organized a public awareness campaign to raise awareness about gendered impacts of COVID-19, in particular the emotional and economic toll and the increased burden of care work.

GNWP's partners, the Lady of Peace Community Foundation organized digital peace dialogues called "peace chat rooms" to lead meaningful conversations around gender-based violence and femicide in the context of COVID-19. The peace chat rooms were also a space to raise awareness and strategies to counter and address toxic masculinity.

GNWP partners have also noted that the food shortages and economic hardship caused by COVID-19 and the lockdown measures has "created tensions, which could have led to violence". Women have diffused these tensions in their communities, and created opportunities for the communities to feed themselves through implementing stokvel programmes. During the COVID-19 lockdown, Winterveld Care Centre created a group called Friends of Justice to "build peace on the streets". They raised awareness within the communities to encourage them to get to know each other and live in peace.

