

Joint Statement on Preventing and Responding to Sexual and Gender Based Violence during COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has already had a tremendous impact on the health and wellbeing of people all over the world, as well as on health, social and economic systems.

While we applaud the Government of Liberia's difficult decisions to declare a State of Emergency and lockdown to slow the spread of the virus and save lives, we also recognize the enormous toll that this will have on Liberian citizens, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable communities – and the women and girls among them.

Recent statistics indicate that more men have reported cases of COVID-19; however, women will disproportionately suffer the socio-economic impacts. Women and girls are more likely to be informally employed, selling in open air markets, and engaging in petty trade. Restrictions on travel and selling will impact their ability to earn income and feed their families during the outbreak. Women also make up the majority of healthcare workers and will face higher risk of contracting the disease without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE). They will also bear the increased burden of care in their informal and unpaid roles as caregivers in the home and communities. The burden will even be higher for many female-headed households, as these women are often solely responsible for the feeding and other basic needs of children and elderly family members. With school closures and the stay at home order, women will take on greater responsibility for children who are home from school.

Having significant collective experience in sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) prevention and response, including and working with survivors, we know that oftentimes homes are not always safe spaces. It is true that “for many women and girls, the threat looms largest where they should be safest — in their own homes.”¹ Under normal circumstances, violence against women and girls is Liberia's most widespread and persistent human rights abuse. In Liberia as elsewhere, the rates of domestic and intimate partner violence will skyrocket with more people confined to their homes, and with increased household poverty and financial pressure due to loss of income. Other stressors such as confinement and isolation in narrow spaces, disruption of social networks and public services coupled with violent masculine norms are likely to contribute to higher incidence of SGBV. Because of inflection in the home or government lockdown, women and girls experiencing domestic violence and sexual abuse will become trapped in environments with their abuser(s). This will not only place them at greater risk of harm, it will also lead to unwanted pregnancies, as was seen during the Ebola outbreak. When the doors are locked, and movement is restricted, it becomes even harder than normal to escape from your abuser.

While violence in homes is increasing, services and justice for survivors will likely be harder to access. The lockdown is negatively affecting the already weak system to address SGBV

¹ UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>

and provide justice for survivors. There may be a substantial breakdown in the referral pathway, with hospitals overburdened and law enforcement focused on enforcing the stay at home order, curfew and other orders under the State of Emergency. Restrictions on movement (limited to one family member per hour and within communities) will also hamper reporting of SGBV cases and contribute to an increase in teenage pregnancy for girls who will be unable to access contraceptives and sexual and reproductive health services during the lockdown.

Finally, as a result of the lockdown being enforced by largely male-dominated security forces, there may be an increase of violence not only in the homes, but also in the public sphere. The current environment is amenable to hyper-masculinity characterized by domination, control, violence and terror.² This contributes to an environment prone to violence and conflict and to human rights abuses. There have already been calls by Liberian human rights activists to ensure that the joint security forces enforcing these regulations do so with a high degree of professionalism and respect for the rule of law. We will echo this call and highlight the element of sexual exploitation and abuse. After curfew during the Ebola outbreak, unofficial and self-organized community “security” perpetrated sexual violence. There were also some reports of joint security forces perpetrating sexual violence and plenty of anecdotal evidence that sexual exploitation and abuse was rampant at checkpoints for women wanting to pass with goods.

Protection of women and girls is a life-saving intervention – especially in times of emergencies. Therefore, there must be a clear plan in place to maintain critical services for survivors. Recognizing that : 1) there is a serious need to maintain gender-based violence protection and response mechanisms in the context of the coronavirus outbreak and 2) that the Government has an obligation to exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate, punish and provide redress for acts of SGBV. Therefore, we collectively recommend the following:

To the Government of Liberia:

- Ensure that SGBV protection and response services are integrated as essential in the multisectoral COVID-19 national response plan;
- Ensure the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, including the GBV Unit and Adolescent Girls Unit, include messages on anti-domestic violence and rape and the open referral pathways as well as strengthen reporting mechanisms as part of awareness efforts around COVID-19. This requires the Ministry is prioritized and adequately resourced to maintain its coordination, information sharing and data-collection role remotely;
- Ensure that SGBV support services, including those at county level, remain a critical and life sustaining activity, therefore granting access to SGBV case managers and responders during the lockdown, ensuring the Women and Children Protection Section at the Liberia National Police remains staffed and functional (not reassigned and with adequate resources for fuel and logistics), and increasing resources to one-stop centers, safe-homes, shelters, and public health facilities to address women’s specific health needs in communities;
- Establish clear protocols and a whistleblowing mechanism for reporting SGBV cases including those that involve the joint security forces; and maintain an updated referral

² Austin, Duke, W. 2016. “Hyper-Masculinity and Disaster: The Reconstruction of Hegemonic Masculinity in the Wake of a Calamity.” In *Men, Masculinities and Disaster*, edited by Enarson, Elaine, and Bob Pearson, 45–55. New York: Routledge.

pathway to ensure reported cases are managed properly and safely (from investigation and preservation of evidence all the way to survivors' redress);

- Ensure that women and girls, including female headed households and women in caregiving roles (especially unpaid care) are targeted in expanded nationwide social protection programs to reduce the vulnerability and pressure at household level. This should include food and basic commodities, women specific needs (baby formula, sanitary pads, etc.), subsidies and cash grants;
- Ensure sexual and reproductive health (SRHR) services including contraceptives, family planning information, STIs prevention and HIV treatment and care services are deemed essential and SRHR information incorporated into community health engagement activities for COVID-19. This is particularly important to prevent stock-out of critical commodities and lifesaving medications for women living with HIV.

To the international donor community (including UN entities, bilateral partners, International Financial Institutions and the EU):

- Provide immediate flexibility within current and pipeline funding to ensure that existing programs can adapt to the gender-specific risks and impacts of COVID-19, including protection and provision of food and non-food items;
- Rapidly review the need for extra support to women's rights organizations, safe homes and women's safe spaces, as a response to the increasing numbers of SGBV cases as a result of lockdowns and curfews;
- Advocate for the Multisectoral COVID-19 National Response Plan to recognize SRHR and SGBV services as critical and essential within the COVID-19 response;
- Closely monitor developments of violations of women's rights and SGBV by security forces and call out any repressive and undemocratic policies and excessive use of force.

Signed by:

