THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ACT COALITION'S CALL TO GOVERNMENT FOR A GENDER SENSITIVE NATIONAL COVID-19 RESPONSE - 21st April 2020

1.0 OVERVIEW

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to hit hard and disrupt the daily lives of women, men and children, governments are under immense pressure to curb further spread of the disease and offer a fast response to avert its devastating consequences to human life and the livelihood. As the Government of Uganda progressively rolls out preparedness, risk reduction and response measures, it is imperative that critical attention is given to the different impacts COVID-19 has on all other pandemics and disasters that women and men face.

As already noticed in Uganda, amidst the implementation of the COVID-19 response that includes scale-down of government and non-government services, movement restrictions and lock down of businesses, women have continued to shoulder the burden of maintaining the wellbeing and continuity of their families and their society at large through working to provide maternal care, child care, elderly care and health care. Women also constitute the majority of health care providers in health facilities, unpaid care workers in the domestic sectors, and workers in retail markets, food markets and provision of social services, most of which have remained open during the lockdown.

As the Government continues to encourage citizens to stay at home and further enforces a 7:00pm-8:00am curfew, women, men and children find themselves in smaller spaces for longer periods of time under circumstances of economic stress with some families unable to afford two meals a day while others cannot practically maintain social distance. In situations of economic and social stress, women and girls always bear the brunt of this due to the pre-existing gender inequities that make them susceptible to violence, their unique inalienable and reproductive functions, and low status in society. It is a wonder that a rise in cases of violence against women and girls has not been witnessed in other countries given the number of (5) of which rose steadily during the March 4 (the issue of the New Vision newspaper). To respond to current challenges and the emerging international challenges, women and girls have been called upon to participate in the implementation of programs and plans to respond to emerging issues of violence against women and girls during the pandemic, and allow no cost and extended planning efforts to proceed after the pandemic.

7. Distribution of food

The Government of Uganda has embarked on a noble task to provide food to vulnerable families during this very difficult time and it is highly commendable. There is need to ensure that this does not exacerbate women and girls’ vulnerabilities.

Recommendation: That priority is given to female persons with disabilities and child-headed households as they face exacerbated vulnerability and that food is given to individuals rather than households to regulate the unequal power relations within families to reduce women’s dependence on men and ensure women have enough to eat their children.

Recommendation: That food to female and child-headed households is distributed by women responders to prevent abuse, harassment and exploitation of women and girls.

4. Support for women in service provision and other essential service providers

As many women continue to serve as frontliners during this pandemic, they are exposed to more risk of contracting COVID-19, abuse, sexual harassment and violation of their sexual and reproductive health rights.

Recommendation: That urgent support including incentives in form of firm’s affiliation, protective gear, medical insurance be accorded to women at the front line such as nurses and other emergency response workers to reduce the economic and social strain both at work and home.

Recommendation: That measures to prevent sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation of women while on duty be put in place. These can be incorporated within the standard operating procedures guiding the different responses to ensure safety of women and the putting stringent penalties for non-compliance.

Recommendation: That all women at the front line are provided with protective gear and that those that are pregnant are enabled to continue accessing maternity services and other necessary sexual and reproductive health services at designated health facilities.

Recommendation: A number of security officers both male and female remain operational to ensure the COVID-19 risk reduction measures, many of them have been seen stripping cars and taking the passengers to close range in addition to physically sensitizing movement permits. Protective gear should be provided to all officers and other essential service providers to uphold their safety and avert further spread of the disease.

5. Women in the informal sector

The informal sector has been disrupted most by the pandemic, this is where majority of women derive sustenance, some women had acquired loans for their businesses and women who have no radial rates of digitized businesses. Some faced in the sale of food stuffs have opted to stay at home to ensure business continuity and also adhere to the government guidelines.

Recommendation: That Government frees interest rates on all acquired loans for women and men working in the informal sector and puts in place a small business’ interest free start up packages to revive businesses of this kind at the end of the pandemic.

Recommendation: That women who have opted to stay at their stalls in different markets are provided with protective gear and additional security to uphold their safety and security from likely dangers such as sexual violence and robbery. Mechanisms for safe accommodation nearby should also be considered in partnership with hotel or hostel owners.

6. Support to the elderly

This pandemic has proven to be the hardest told on the elderly, majority of which are women and in most cases women widows. With the limited movements, support reaching the elderly, many of whom are in the rural areas is very minimal. On the other hand, lack of adequate social security for the elderly in Uganda poses even a greater danger to our elderly persons during this pandemic, where their vulnerability was increased at every subsidence to ensure timely provision of much needed support.

Recommendation: That the elderly be registered and provided with much needed support in form of food, soap, water and other necessities; and periodic monitoring is conducted by the relevant local government structures to ensure elderly persons have the necessities or get necessary emergency support when need arises.

Recommendation: That emergency response services for the elderly to access foodstuff and medications at every subsidence to ensure timely provision of much needed support.

7. Support to pregnant women, HIV infected persons and persons with disabilities

During this pandemic vulnerable populations are not only at risk of suffering devastating effects if they contract the disease but also having their needs unmet which exposes them to critical danger and violation of their rights.

Recommendation: That provision of maternity and sexual and reproductive health services is prioritized and that designated transport for expectant mothers or those due for their prenatal and postnatal appointments to the health facilities is provided; this should include immunization services for babies and toddlers.

Recommendation: That persons living with HIV/AIDS majority of which are women and girls are provided with their drugs and adequate food for the entire duration of the lock down and in case of emergencies, transport to health facilities is provided.

Recommendation: That streamlined support for persons with disabilities which includes women and men in most cases, wards, with the limited movements, support reaching the elderly, many of whom are in the rural areas is very minimal. On the other hand, lack of adequate social security for the elderly in Uganda poses even a greater danger to our elderly persons during this pandemic, where their vulnerability was increased at every subsidence to ensure timely provision of much needed support.


Recommendation: That gender sensitive information on prevention and response is included in all health dialogues and disseminated in ways that ensure none is left behind. This will enhance safety of everyone and demystify some of the COVID-19 related myths that are on the rise in some communities.

9. Access to adequate and clean water

Access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene is critical to prevent further spread of COVID-19 and Government’s efforts to ensure availability of hand washing stations in all households is commendable. However, for majority of rural and semi Urban communities, access to safe and clean water is undermined by poor living conditions, distance from water sources and absence of clean or safe water points within their facilities. This may lead to the household burden to collect and ensure that households have water.

Recommendation: That the Government invests in short and long-term avenues to provide safe and potable water for communities in rural and semi urban areas during and after the COVID-19 response.

3. COCLUSION

Continuous provision of effective protection from further spread of COVID-19 is a multi-sectoral response and requires the coordination of efforts from all sectors to respond. The Government of Uganda and the Development Partners are to consider the above recommendations and take necessary action.