

PATTERNS OF VIOLENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN AND GIRLS AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN KENYA

Executive summary

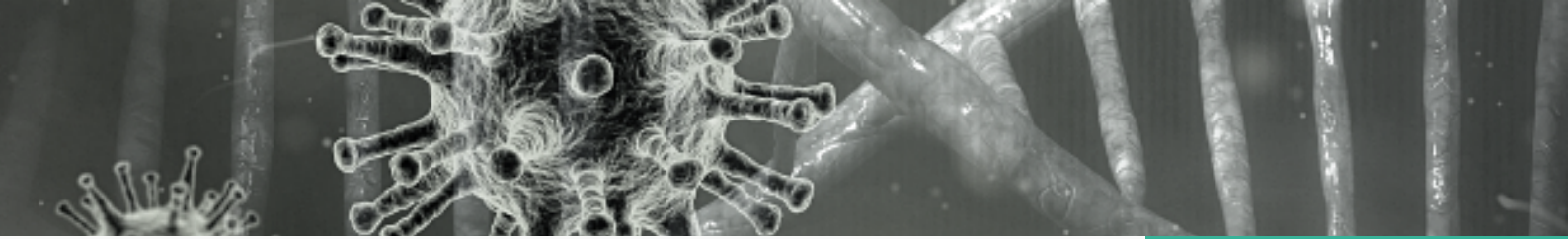
Children, particularly girls, have heightened vulnerability to sexual violence committed by non-stranger perpetrators (e.g., neighbours) at private residences during the daytime, owing to school closures and a lack of alternative safe venues.

- Women have heightened vulnerability to sexual and physical violence at all times of day, with attacks by stranger and non-stranger (e.g., intimate partners) perpetrators occurring in both private residences and in public, owing to social isolation and being trapped with abusers.
- The socio-economic impact of the crisis has increased tensions within households, with reports of physical violence and increased homelessness for women.
- Vulnerability to violence has been amplified across the population as a whole, with numerous incidents of death and injuries caused by the police while enforcing COVID-19 emergency measures.
- The health and human rights implications of the findings lead us to urge policy makers to adopt the following recommendations:
 - Ensure children have access to alternative safe venues when schools are closed, especially vulnerable children, such as those in settlements, living and working on the streets, and children with existing conditions, such as any form of disability.
 - Ensure government COVID-19 emergency management and recovery plans include alternative emergency routes for accessing SGBV services, such as by providing free Wi-Fi and platforms for online and telephone reporting.
 - Enable SGBV survivors to access medico-legal services by exempting them from lockdown requirements. Additionally, bystanders who violate lockdown to aid survivors must not be arrested or prosecuted for doing so.
 - Strengthen the medico-legal response to SGBV by expediting restraining orders and prosecutions, and by establishing a national police sex crimes unit to provide one-stop access to SGBV services.
 - Invest in the real-time data collection and analysis of sexual violence and other violations to identify possible geographic clusters and crimes being perpetrated by the same offenders, and to measure SGBV service accessibility to ensure appropriate support.

About the research

The “Patterns of violence and its impact on women and girls” project was prompted by concerns raised by human rights organisations that the COVID-19 crisis is exacerbating women’s and girls’ vulnerability to sexual and other forms of violence and preventing their access to life-saving services. We interviewed 80 survivors—which included 29 children under the age of 18—across Kenya from March 24th to June 15th to obtain information about the violations perpetrated against them during the COVID-19 emergency.





Implications of emergency measures on women and girls

Emergency measures instituted in Kenya to control the spread of COVID-19 have included school closures and a dusk-to-dawn curfew. Our findings indicate these measures may be increasing the vulnerability of women and girls to sexual and other forms of violence. We found that school closures may have made children especially vulnerable to sexual violence, particularly offences committed by non-strangers (e.g., neighbours) during the daytime. Findings from our research suggest younger children are being victimised than during previous periods. The average age of child survivors in our sample was 12 years old, while the national average pre-pandemic was 16 years old. Further, women and girls' vulnerability to increased violence in the wake of COVID-19 has been amplified by the stigmatisation, threats and further physical violence they face when trying to report incidents to the police and access medical care. Women also remain in physically violent and abusive situations because they fear reprisal from perpetrators and are destitute. The Kenyan government does not systematically record crimes reported to the police or track them as they proceed through the health, police, or court systems. Hence, trends in reporting and prosecuting sexual and other forms of violence are impossible to assess, particularly in relation to emergency situations, such as COVID-19.



Policy implications

There are three main policy recommendations that have come out of this research. First, ensure that inclusive, integrated, and multisectoral SGBV prevention and protection, especially for women and girls, are central to the Kenyan government's COVID-19 emergency and recovery plans at the national and subnational levels. Planning needs to include consideration of gender norms and dynamics. Planning should include strengthening the medico-legal response to SGBV, exempting the access of vital services from lockdown restrictions, and providing alternative emergency access routes to services. The second recommendation is to ensure the protection of all children is given utmost consideration in COVID-19 policy, especially regarding the provision of alternative safe venues when schools are shut. There should be age-appropriate health information messaging, and training for first responders about child protection risks. Finally, routine data collection processes are urgently needed in the healthcare, police, and judicial systems, including real-time monitoring of sexual and other forms of violence incidents to detect offence patterns, and access to SGBV services. Data should be disaggregated to ensure the representation of vulnerable groups in the analyses.

