



Status and Dynamics of Gender Mainstreaming in East Africa Community COVID-19 Social and Economic Response Policies, Strategies and Interventions

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Context

The COVID-19 outbreak of 2020 wreaked havoc on the global economy, trade and many social aspects. Africa has not been immune. According to a report by Deloitte (2020), losses to the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) are approximated at US\$ 9 trillion. The same report predicts that countries in Eastern and Western Africa that have seen an increase in their GDP will have a decline in their GDP in 2020. With such decreases in GDP, the vulnerable and marginalized in society are likely to suffer the most, in particular African women who tend to

be poorer and more marginalized than their male counterparts. They also have less access to economic opportunities, education, health and social services.

The problem

Already, African women are prone to economic hardships and lack access to welfare and other services. Therefore, when a pandemic such as COVID-19 occurs, women can find themselves in dire situations. This is because women face higher socio-economic and health risks compared to men because of the pandemic. Some of these include risk of corona virus infection due their frontline role in the care economy, reproductive risk, risk of maternal mortality, protection risks including increased school dropouts, increased risk of early pregnancy, early marriage, female genital mutilation, increased risk of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), and risk to livelihoods particularly for those women in the informal sector but also for women in the formal sectors who have to take up additional unpaid care and educating roles.

Background

It is against this background that this research is set. This study aims to examine the status of women in the East African Community (EAC) with a view to comprehending how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected women, and to further investigate what policies and interventions have been instituted to address gender issues emerging from the pandemic crisis, and further identifying gender gaps in policies, including proposing new gender policies and interventions to address these gaps.

The results

The results of the study are presented along five thematic areas: education, health, land ownership, career and labour market, including representation and public decision making.

Education: Prior to COVID-19, access to education and retention of girls in school was problematic across the EAC countries. This has been exacerbated by school closures due to COVID-19. Girls are likely to engage in transactional sex due to financial constraints, thus exposing themselves to HIV/AIDS and unplanned pregnancies, which will worsen educational completion rates. If there is no intervention, there will be a reversal on any gains made in girls' education and gender equality.

Health: Women in all EAC countries have low decision making power in sexual relationships, and low uptake of contraceptives particularly in rural areas. This places women at risk of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and

unwanted pregnancies. Women's health services have been exacerbated by most EAC governments placing resources into COVID initiatives; if this is left unchecked, it will have significant impact on women's health and may reverse any gains made in this area. Quarantine centres are also not set up in a gender sensitive way, with men and women placed together in the facilities. There is also a lack of sanitary items for women confined in these centres. Gender-Based Violence (GBV) has been on the increase during the pandemic. It is important for the benefit of society to address this issue of GBV.

Land ownership: Across the six (6) EAC countries, it was found that the majority of women do not own or control land. This is the case even in Rwanda where women are the majority in parliament. Not only is this problematic prior to the pandemic but during the COVID-19 situation, women are left in a precarious position as they cannot take loans to secure their businesses as they have no security. They are also left vulnerable in case of death of male relatives; therefore, women can face eviction or land grabbing.

Career and labour market: It was found that men still dominate formal employment even in Rwanda where women have significant representation in Parliament. Women in the EAC were largely found in the private sphere or the informal sector. The few women who are in the formal sector have been most affected by the pandemic shut down of non-essential services such as tourism. Women cross border traders during the pandemic have been increasing, using illegal routes and are exposing themselves to assault, theft and rape.

Representation and public decision making: Apart from Rwanda, women in the other countries are under-represented in public decision-making. This lack of representation has an implication in COVID-19 responses. Policies and decisions made around funding, relief measures and other core legislative acts are done without a gender lens.

Implications for policy makers: It was found that EAC and country strategic plans for preparedness and response were not gender-sensitive. There is a need for strong gender analysis, taking into account gendered roles, responsibilities, and dynamics. Gender should be a cross-cutting issue in the regional COVID-19 response plan running across all the guidance themes, including risk communication approaches, research and mitigation against social and economic impacts. A clear articulation of gender issues is crucial for regional guidance policy documents because it ensures the prioritization of women issues by individual member country governments. It is against these policy gaps that the following recommendations are put forward:

- Gender (analysis) in strategic regional and national COVID-19-related policies are essential.

- It is imperative to have women representation in COVID-19 decision making processes.
- There is need for gender-sensitive research and data on COVID-19.
- It is important for EAC governments to strengthen the retention of girls in education.
- It is important to strengthen prevention measures to reduce sexual and gender-based violence risks.
- There is need to improve communication and information about COVID-19, particularly among women; that is, to find different channels for communication that cater to lower literacy rates.
- EAC countries need to focus on food and nutrition security as part of social protection. In the wake of the pandemic, women shoulder the burden of feeding families in African communities, which creates an added workload for them.
- There is need to meet the needs of women healthcare workers and female patients in quarantine/isolation.
- There is need to redress the interrupted access to sexual and reproductive health services.
- Governments should strengthen prevention measures to reduce the risks of sexual and gender-based violence.



Mission

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