THE FEMINIST HUMANITARIAN NETWORK

WOMEN'S HUMANITARIAN VOICES: Covid-19 through a feminist lens in KENYA

Pastoralist Girls Initiative
Empowering Girls, Saving Communities
The Feminist Humanitarian Network (FHN) is a member-based network of grassroots, local, and national women’s rights organisations (WROs), regional networks, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and individuals working to strengthen the agency and amplify the voices of women in emergencies, and to transform the humanitarian system into one that is guided by feminist principles. It facilitates space for its members to share experiences in humanitarian settings and develop collective solutions to overcome patriarchal practices and barriers.1

FHN member in Kenya, Pastoralist Girls Initiative (PGI), led research in Kenya to better understand the context-specific impacts and challenges WROs face in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the feminist solutions and community-based responses that have been undertaken by WROs throughout. In order to understand the impacts of the crisis on WROs and the women they work with, PGI interviewed WROs in Kenya, as well as government bodies with a gender focus.

The findings of this study revealed that Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the general operations and activities of both the WROs and the people they have served through their activities. The virus is widespread in the areas the WROs operate in and has posed a major risk to the health of their staff and those they work with. Although all WROs reported they had interacted with the humanitarian system, they highlighted that they faced major challenges, such as a lack of recognition of their leadership at higher levels of decision-making. Only a few respondents confirmed that they have been able to make key decisions at the county/local level.

However, this research has also revealed the creativity and adaptability of the WROs when faced with the considerable challenges posed by Covid-19. The feminist strategies implemented by WROs have resulted in positive impacts, especially when collaborating with organisations offering medical care, psychosocial support, data gathering, and co-ordination.

Those WROs that have not been able to secure representation reasoned out that failure at the higher levels was attributed to lack of recognition of the voice of women in all spheres of life including WROs.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Recommendations

1 Increase women’s leadership at all levels of Covid-19 response structures and adapt funding policies and mechanisms so that WROs can respond more effectively to the pandemic. This includes increasing funding for women’s rights and women-led organisations that are responding to the crisis.

2 Ensure responses to Covid-19 are gender-sensitive and inclusive by adopting adequate measures to protect peace and prevent aggravation of conflicts, and specifically deal with violence against women and girls.

3 Adapt targeting methodologies to ensure income for groups disproportionately affected by Covid-19, especially where women are heavily represented (tourism, teaching, retail, restaurants, hospitality, etc.).

All images in this report are of Pastoralist Girls’ Initiative’s work in Kenya.
The Covid-19 pandemic is a global health and societal emergency that requires the adoption of unprecedented measures to control the rapid spread of the deadly virus. The virus was confirmed to have reached Kenya on March 13, 2020, with the initial cases reported in the capital city, Nairobi, and in the coastal area, Mombasa County. Upon declaring Covid-19 as a national disaster, President Uhuru Kenyatta implemented a series of measures to curb the outbreak of Covid-19. Among these was the introduction of public health interventions such as international and domestic travel restrictions accompanied by increased border controls; scale up of testing and contact tracing; promotion of regular hand washing and sanitising, physical distancing, closure of all schools and higher learning institutions and public and private sector employee to work from home, except essential service workers.

This study was carried out to assess the impact of Covid-19 on selected WROs, focusing on their activities, coping strategies, challenges, and proposed solutions. Respondents include FHN member organisations and other PGI partners, as well as other WROs. Semi-structured questionnaires were used for all respondents. Initially, face-to-face interviews were conducted using the prepared questions but researchers quickly adapted the Covid-safe method of sending questionnaires via email.

**Contextual background**

The Covid-19 global crisis is disproportionately affecting women and girls. As they make up the majority of frontline workers, women are highly exposed to the disease. Lockdowns implemented to curb the spread of the virus have also increased instances of gender-based violence (GBV), particularly domestic and intimate partner violence, curbed access to essential sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, and seriously affected women’s livelihoods and economic opportunities. This makes it even more important that women’s voices are equally included in the decision-making spaces and processes where responses are formed.

According to International Development Law Organization (IDLO), Kenya finds itself at an opportune moment to advance gender equality. The country’s new constitution, adopted in 2010, included provisions on economic, social and cultural rights in the Bill of Rights for the first time. One of the most celebrated aspects was the recognition of gender equality and the goal of achieving gender parity in government, enshrined in the principle stating that no more than two-thirds of the members of an elective or appointive body shall be of the same gender. However, implementation of the two-thirds gender principle has been an issue for the country as women are still underrepresented in government.
Kenya brought in a new, rights-based constitution in 2010, which provides the legal framework for the government to fulfill basic rights, and for marginalised and vulnerable groups, especially women and children, to claim their rights. However, women still face challenges including the ability to participate effectively in decision making and leadership, especially as most of the female members of the national parliament and the county assemblies are new to the legislature. Although some women managed to successfully contest and earned their places in parliament, the proportion of women is statistically insignificant when compared with that of men. This has resulted in the collapse of the bill which was meant to facilitate the no more than two-thirds gender rule.

The situation is compounded by the financial constraints and difficulties in coordination of the women’s movement to advocate for the constitutional gender equality gains. The Kenyan economy remains vulnerable to external shocks and unemployment continues to be a particular challenge for women. For instance, while over 80% of Kenyan women are engaged in small holder farming, only 1% own land in their own right, they access less than 10% of available credit, and less than 1% of agriculture credit.7

Women’s limited participation in the social, economic, and political processes in Kenya is a factor of the historical patriarchal nature of the society.8 Women are faced with both systemic and cultural challenges in their bid to contribute to the County or National development agenda. Discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes continue to be entertained in both formal and informal institutions thereby hindering progress towards gender equality. A case in point is the unequal participation and representation of women in political process, which has been informed by biased customs and stereotypes.9

Women’s enjoyment of economic rights is also limited by the unequal distribution of resources, and limited access to factors of production, such as land and financial capital. Recently there has been a positive shift in the social norms and practices that used to limit women’s access to education and their enjoyment of the right to employment and adequate standards of living. However, despite this, women who have had access to education face barriers in accessing leadership positions even though they are qualified.

Social norms that condone violence against women and girls also prevent them from equal participation and full enjoyment of life. These entrenched social norms, practices and structural challenges at all levels have created an environment of gender inequality that prevents the transformation of gender power relations that is necessary to advance the rights of women and girls and to ensure women have access to leadership roles and decision-making forums and processes.
KEY FINDINGS: CHALLENGES

The Covid-19 situation in WROs’ areas of operation

In the interviews, the majority of the respondents confirmed the ubiquity of Covid-19 in the areas in which they work and its devastating effect on the health of WRO staff and beneficiaries.

Some respondents had staff who tested positive for Covid-19 but overcame the virus and resumed their duties at work thereafter. Others experienced their colleagues dying of Covid-19. In some WROs, as many as four Covid-19 cases were reported to have been isolated and/or quarantined after testing and this led to the closure of the office to allow for fumigation and staff testing. Trying to reassure the affected colleagues was one of the most distressing moments of the pandemic for these WROs.

Most of the respondents reported that Covid-19 has largely had a negative impact on both the WROs as well as the communities they support, not just in terms of health but also widespread issues in society.

When asked to describe their experience of Covid-19 on their day-to-day operations, one respondent said:

“We have had reported cases of members of staff of other organisations we partner and work with turning out positive for Covid-19. We had to completely close the office for two weeks and fumigate the office during that time. I took my test which turned out negative before returning to work. We worked from home most of this period.”

Respondents indicated that they were aware of the safety protocols as prescribed by the health professionals, and reported that they had implemented key protective measures including: physical distancing, sanitising hands and surfaces, wearing masks and other forms of PPE, avoiding physical contact and directing coughs into the elbow.

The call for social distancing has also meant that people have few activities to partake in, and cherished events like religious gatherings, funerals, weddings and school activities where people met and interacted are now limited to only few essential social interactions, further increasing isolation and frustration.

Respondents generally reported feeling overburdened, stressed, less independent and, at the same time, lonely and missing support networks of friends and extended families during the pandemic.
Gender based violence and issues of gender inequality

“Gender equality was impacted negatively as tense social relations resulted in increases in intimate partner violence. Additionally, women who were already working in precarious informal jobs lost income and jobs while those who are essential workers found themselves at the frontline of exposure. Additionally, working women found it difficult to work from home due to the increased double shift of having to care for children while trying to work remotely as schools and day care centers were closed.”

Refugee Consortium of Kenya

The impact of Covid-19 on WROs and the communities they work with has been grave. Gains made in gender equality have been significantly affected by the pandemic. There is limited space for activism, increased intimate partner violence, teen pregnancies, early child marriage, overburdening of women and girls with an increased burden of childcare and household chores due to loss of jobs and gender-based violence.

Respondents shared that the challenges brought about by the crisis include an increase in female genital mutilation (FGM) and early and/or forced marriages. Closure of schools due to Covid-19 meant that girls could more easily be subjected to FGM and early marriage (the former often leading to the latter).

Economic uncertainty has resulted in tense social relations and spikes in violence, which led to increased cases of reported GBV and intimate partner violence (IPV). This increase is associated with movement restrictions which confine partners together for longer periods of time.

While Covid-19 had had detrimental impacts on the gains made towards gender equality, there is some debate among respondents about whether the pandemic has actually brought about a shift in attitudes with men, who are usually out of the house most of the day for work or socialising, gaining a deeper understanding of women’s many responsibilities in the household. This potential shift could result in a powerful opportunity for change in the aftermath of the crisis.

Gender inequality – economic impacts and women’s livelihood opportunities

Although initial data indicates that Covid-19 is more likely to cause severe physical symptoms or mortality in men than in women, research from past public health emergencies and analysis of structural factors indicate that the pandemic is disproportionately affecting women and girls in every aspect of their lives. Women carry heavier caregiving burdens, which expose them to greater physical and mental health risks, and are at increased risk for GBV, particularly domestic and intimate partner violence. The respondents reported that as the infection rates increased, there reached a time when the health facilities could not cope with the admission needs. This forced the patients to be nursed at home by women in the household.

Respondents reported that women who were already working in precarious informal jobs lost jobs and therefore income, while those who are essential workers found themselves at the frontline of exposure. Participants themselves reported the increased difficulties they found when having to work from home due to the double shift of having to care for children while trying to work remotely as schools and day care centers were closed.

Some respondents reported that the household income dwindled due to loss of employment and movement/curfew...
restrictions which made it difficult to earn money. Others confirmed that the household income declined since most households depend on daily labour and markets which were affected by the Covid-19 measures. This has increased household vulnerability and inability to withstand shocks. Respondents reported that women are disproportionately affected by poverty and excluded from property ownership.

Many researchers fear that the pandemic will create long-term gaps in terms of girls’ education as well as women’s participation in formal paid labor, which in turn risks strengthening traditional patriarchal gender norms and the division of labor within the household and the economy. Those women who still have jobs, tend to do even more housework than before.

**WROs’ leadership and decision making**

The evidence is clear: Covid-19 is disproportionately affecting women and girls. Given that, it is all the more important that Covid-19 responses are gendered, and that women and girls are able to participate in making the decisions that affect them, as is their right. In many contexts, a lack of gender balanced leadership could worsen the effects of the crisis for women and girls and their families and communities. There is also a risk that gender equality gains could be lost during the Covid-19 crisis if such salient issues are not prioritised.

Although women are on the frontlines of the crisis in their homes, communities, and health care facilities, they are often excluded from the community and national decision-making processes and governance structures that determine the response. Women’s political participation remains low; on average, women comprise just 24.3% of the lawmakers in Kenya’s national parliaments.\(^{13}\) At the local level, women civil society leaders and women-led organisations receive little funding to respond to crises and are often left out of decision making. The Covid-19 pandemic is gendered in its consequences and experiences.

This research confirmed that WROs face major challenges such as lack of recognition of their leadership roles at higher levels except at the local/county level. A number of WRO respondents reported that they have not received recognition for their leadership and response efforts. Those that have not been able to secure representation believe that a lack of recognition at the higher levels of decision making is due to a lack of resources as well as the dismissal of the voice of women in all spheres of life.
including WROs. The respondents further reported that the exclusion of a diverse range of women from public and political decision-making leads to laws, policies, public decisions, budget allocations, services, and programs that fail to account for women’s experiences, needs, and rights. A number of respondents reported that they had championed formation and strengthening of county Covid-19 committees at all levels and inclusion of women in decision making at all these levels.

Only a few respondents confirmed that they have been able to make key decisions at county/local level. PGI mentioned that during Covid-19, they appeared to have been more visible in Tana River and Garissa counties where they work including recognition of their voice in decision making. The organization also reported that it managed to access key decision-making spaces, mainly at the county level where their major participation focused on gender policy development, gender technical working groups for Garissa and Tana River, and policy contributions to the sexual and gender-based violence act. PGI reported they believe they can get access to these spaces at the county level because they are considered as leaders in programming in the said counties, they are a member of the network and they also have the ability to enter into deliberate engagement with other players.

Respondents also reported that Covid-19 prevention measures impacted WROs’ active participation at all levels, from the local to international, and restricted the collective action and voice of individual WROs, women’s movements and networks.

Funding opportunities for WROs

Respondents reported that accessing resources to support the ongoing work of WROs became difficult owing to the urgent prioritisation of available funds for Covid-19 related emergency response. They also shared that the governance and general operations of WROs were impacted negatively as organisations that are already underfunded found it difficult to access funds to cope with the pandemic.

Furthermore, WROs that are solely dependent on donor funds were forced to scale down their operations, and some have even had to lay off staff due to the pandemic. Generally, access to funds from donors became more difficult due to limited flexibility, forcing WROs to rethink their approaches, resource base and strategies to remain afloat. A number of respondents mentioned limited and reduced funding from United Nations (UN) agencies and international donors.

Some organisations also mentioned that they experienced challenges such as the reduction of funding for key activities with a gender focus. The respondent from Refugee Consortium of Kenya (RCK) reported that the organisation has engaged with the humanitarian system in areas such as refugees and forced migrants’ protection as well as elimination of violence against women and girls. However, the organization experienced a reduction in funding for legal and protection work as focus now shifted to socio-economic resilience during the pandemic.
KEY FINDINGS: WROs' FEMINIST SOLUTIONS

In many instances, WROs have had to find creative solutions to respond to the needs of their communities and respond to the Covid-19 crisis without the support of the international community.

These include offering services virtually e.g. tele-counselling and virtual court representation sessions by WRO staff; reliance on incentive community workers as first responders; and conducting virtual assessments for social assistance for vulnerable survivors.

Other strategies were in response to community needs. WRO’s community-based responses to the specific challenges posed by Covid-19 and the challenges in the humanitarian system included capacity building community workers to become effective responders, enhancing liaison with country and national government officials to ensure continued delivery of services at the community level, and working with local artists, women, and youth-led groups to use innovative communication systems for case reporting and management.

This research sought to define what feminist solutions had been developed and implemented by organisations that are FHN members, and whether there was any material or other support in implementing these solutions. The study also sought to assess if these feminist strategies which were adopted had created any impact through the activities or interventions of the WROs. It was found that funding that was provided for feminist response had positive outcomes. These findings are tabbed to the right.

Impact of the feminist solutions on participating WROs

- Effective coping mechanisms as use of tele-counselling ensured that there was no significant dropout rate or obstacles for clients to complete the counselling.
- Access to justice was expedited due to the introduction of virtual court sessions which proceeded faster than physical sessions.
- Improved resilience to cope with the pandemic due to the provision of social assistance to mitigate the effects of the pandemic.

This study also sought to ascertain if there were factors which made WROs’ feminist humanitarian responses different to the mainstream response in Kenya. Some respondents reported that their approach was a departure from the traditional approach since instead of shutting down services, the WROs came up with virtual and community-based mechanisms of response that ensured that beneficiaries were still able to access critical services. Others reported that during the period of the pandemic, they managed to facilitate the building and nurturing of innovative and sustainable women-led grassroots movements that became better equipped to respond to the Covid-19 crisis.
In the wake of the effects of lockdown on humanitarian activities, the study sought to find out from the respondents, based on their first-hand experience, what the local/national governments could do better to meet the needs of women and girls during a humanitarian emergency. The suggestions from the respondents centered on the need to register all humanitarian responders as essential workers to ensure that humanitarian services are still accessible during emergencies and also involving and giving space to women led decision making mechanisms.

Amidst the glaring challenges posed by Covid-19, the respondents were asked to describe how WROs have adapted to respond to the needs of their communities and respond to Covid-19, without the support of the international community.

The following approaches were listed by the interviewees:

• Use of incentive/community workers as first responders

• Making toll free lines available for easier reporting

• Networking with other WROs, county governments, and the national government

• Using strengthened local systems and existing structures like nyumba kumi and administration

• Reaching out to the most needy in the community as well as strengthened women-led collectives

• Engagement in active resource mobilisation and delivering impact

• Working with local community resources including responders

One respondent, RCK, reported that they used the following approaches to the needs of their communities amidst the Covid-19 crisis:

• Offering services virtually e.g. tele-counselling and virtual court sessions.

• Reliance on incentive community workers as first responders.

• Conducting virtual assessments for social assistance for vulnerable survivors.

• Capacity building community workers to become effective responders.

• Enhancing liaison with county and national government officials to ensure continued delivery of services at the community level.
The role of WROs in the humanitarian system’s response to Covid-19 in Kenya

The interviews confirmed that there are several stakeholders playing diverse roles in fighting the pandemic, ranging from provision of medical care, psychosocial support, providing information about Covid-19 and coordinating policy response to collating data on Covid-19 cases and deaths. At the time of writing, Kenya is experiencing a second wave of the virus, with a worrying increase in new infections as well as increased mortality in certain areas. Despite WROs’ determination to support their communities, this is a global challenge. We cannot solve this on our own.

Key roles of CSOs and WROs in the fight against Covid-19

- Supporting the national and county governments in resource mobilisation and raising awareness.
- Supporting communities with compliance with Covid-19 directives and recommendations by the government.
- Improved access to water by development of strategic water storage and mass hand washing units in public spaces and schools.
- Sensitisation of the public through use of local radio and social media platforms, local creative plays and dramas and bulk SMS.
- Supported coordination meetings and monitoring visits for the County Covid-19 committees at county, sub-county and ward levels, nyumba kumi initiatives and local administration.
- Distributed soap and washing detergents to households, schools, churches and mosques, prisons, police, government offices and public spaces with hand washing units.
- During the initial phase of lockdown, RCK offered virtual legal counselling, legal representation and psychosocial counselling to GBV survivors. As restrictions eased, social distanced trainings and dialogue forums were conducted with PPE being provided for staff and participants. Additionally, RCK offered social assistance in the form of food, rent, and dignity kids to survivor households whose income and livelihoods had been disrupted by the pandemic. PGI supported the distribution of PPE, sanitisers, wash stations (water tanks), soap, cash transfer to vulnerable households, and supported the county governments of Garissa and Tana River to raise awareness of Covid-19 through radio, posters and bulk SMS.
In conclusion, the findings of this study revealed that Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the general operations of WROs and the communities they work with. However, WROs and the organisations they work with have demonstrated incredible creativity and resilience in facing the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic. Where their solutions have received funding and support, they have doubled their impact.

The pandemic may be affecting everyone, but in particular it has exposed the vulnerabilities of our societies, showing those that were already vulnerable are pushed even further behind. The respondents reported the following impacts:

**Issues of gender equality**

Gender equality has declined due to the pandemic. Women and girls are experiencing limited space for activism, the double burden of working at home while continuing to participate in unpaid work such as childcare and household chores, teen pregnancies, early child marriage, loss of jobs and gender-based violence.

**Governance and general operations of WROs**

Covid-19 has led to a reduction in resources for WROs affecting both their governance and general operations. The donor-dependent WROs have been forced to scale down their operations and/or lay off their staff due to the pandemic. This means the WROs need to rethink their resource base and strategies to remain afloat.

**Household income**

Many people have lost their source income both from employment and reduced economic activities due to Covid-19. This has increased household vulnerability and reduced their ability to withstand economic ‘shocks’.

**Social relations**

The safety protocols enforced to stop the spread of the virus have caused social unrest and generated an increase in violence, especially cases of GBV and IPV.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Suggestions were sought from the respondents on how they thought the international community could improve support to gender dynamics and women and girls in their respective areas and sectors of WROs’ interventions.

There is a need for significant policy adaptation to improve disaster preparedness, management, and response. In order to ensure success, this policy adaptation must take place at all levels – global, regional, national and local. These must address the following issues:

1. Take measures to protect peace and prevent aggravation of conflicts: Many respondents were aggrieved by the heavy-handed way the police handled the lockdown enforcement protocols in Kenya and registered their reservations at the crude lockdown measures. There is need to ensure that responses to Covid-19 are proportionate and founded on human rights principles and feminist values which respect the needs of the most vulnerable.

2. Take measures to deal with violence against women: There is need to integrate prevention efforts and services to respond to violence against women in Covid-19 response plans.

3. Ensure responses to Covid-19 are gender-sensitive and inclusive: Ensure that grassroots women’s organisations meaningfully participate in the development, design, and implementation of crisis and disaster responses by applying a gender lens to all Covid-19 pandemic response and recovery efforts.

4. Review funding policies and mechanisms to adapt to the new reality, shaped by the Covid-19 emergency

5. Increase women’s leadership at all levels of Covid-19 response structures: The findings confirmed that WROs face major challenges such as lack of recognition of their leadership roles at higher levels except a few respondents who reported influence at the local/county level.

The international community must:

- Ensure grassroots WROs who are at the frontline of the Covid-19 response receive flexible funding that can be allocated to emergency responses in the wake of unforeseen circumstances such as the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Generously fund administrative and institutional sustainability costs for the long-term rather than just funding direct program implementation costs.
- Allocate minimum of 50% of total humanitarian funding to WROs during an emergency since gender is an intersecting factor in any humanitarian crisis.
- Partner and work with women-led community based organisations, supporting their adoption of innovative communication technologies.
- Strengthen women’s collectives and networks and actively champion women’s leadership in Covid-19 responses in humanitarian settings. For example, ensure that local women’s rights and women-led organisations have meaningful representation in relevant Covid-19 response coordination bodies at all levels.
- Work through grassroots organisations who have a deeper understanding of their communities of operation and meaningfully engage women and young people in pandemic response and recovery efforts through partnerships, funding, and leadership positions.
• Ensure Covid-19 containment measures (or any future emergency measures) do not put women and girls at increased risk

• Organise regular meetings and exchange platforms to learn from the experiences of WROs during the crisis

**International NGOs should:**

• Work with diverse women’s rights and women-led organisations, movements and leaders to identify the barriers and possible solutions to their participation and leadership in decision making structures

• Support, with collective advocacy and funding, women’s groups and civil society leaders and partner organisations calling for their national governments to implement more gender equitable, effective responses to Covid-19

• Increase partnerships with women’s rights and women-led organisations, in the spirit of advancing UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and women’s and girls’ empowerment and meeting Grand Bargain\(^5\) and Charter for Change commitments\(^6\).

**County or local authorities:**

Local authorities need to prioritise investments in, and access to, basic accessible infrastructure and public services, including in rural areas, informal settlements, and camps for internally displaced people and refugees by:

• Expanding childcare support for working parents where schools, childcare and respite care services are closed, with a particular focus on safe and accessible services for essential workers

• Continuing school feeding programmes and adapting them to the crisis context by preparing rations for delivery or pick-up
REFERENCES

1 Retrieved from: https://www.feministhumanitariannetwork.org/


5 Retrieved from: https://www.idlo.int/where-we-work/sub-saharan-africa/kenya


8 Besides being mentioned by some respondents, a similar notion has been expressed in a document authored by Oxfam at: https://kenya.oxfam.org/what-we-do/womens-rights. Also see: https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/10292.pdf


14 Community groups based on ten neighbouring households.

15 The Grand Bargain is a unique agreement that was launched during the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations who have committed to get more means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the humanitarian action. See: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/about-the-grand-bargain

16 Charter for Change is an initiative led by both National and International NGOs, to practically implement changes to the way the Humanitarian System operates to enable more locally-led response. See: https://charter4change.org/
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*This report is part of wider FHN Research looking at the challenges and feminist solutions taken on by WROs in response to Covid-19 in 8 country contexts.*