

Responding to the Shadow Pandemic

Lessons on Violence Against Women and Girls during COVID-19 from Kenya and Malawi

Authors: Charlotte Wiseman and Natasha Butorac

2020 was due to be a significant year for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Twenty years on from the establishment of the landmark Women Peace and Security agenda (UNSCR 1325), and 25 years since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the world had hoped to see substantial progress. However, with the outbreak of COVID-19 and the widespread recognition of the resulting ‘shadow pandemic’^{1,2} of a global increase in violence against women and girls (VAWG), among other gendered effects,^{3,4} do we risk undoing some of this progress?

Drawing on case studies from our UK Government Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)-funded REINVENT programme in Kenya and the Malawi Violence Against Women and Girls: Prevention and Response (*Tithetse Nkhanza!*) programme, this article explores some of the immediate prevention and response actions these survivor-centred programmes are taking to ensure that the issue of VAWG remains on the agenda, in particular, ensuring that services in this regard remain accessible and responsive, as the world attempts to tackle a public health emergency.

REINVENT (Reducing Violence and Insecurity in Northern and Coastal Kenya) is a multi-year programme addressing inter-communal conflict, weak community-police relations, violence against women and girls (VAWG), violent extremism and election related violence. This is a demand-driven technical assistance and grant making programme. Tetra Tech leads the consortium, the programme is delivered together with Royal United Services Institute and Danish Demining Group. *Tithetse Nkhanza* (which means *Let’s End Violence* in Chichewa) aims to reduce the prevalence of VAWG and improve the justice system for women and girls living with violence in Malawi. Tetra Tech leads the consortium, and delivers together with Social Development Direct and Plan International.

The rise of VAWG in Kenya and Malawi

The prevalence of VAWG in both Kenya and Malawi was high before COVID-19. 45% of women and girls in Kenya and around 57% of women, 54% of in-school girls and 61% of out-of-school girls in Malawi had experienced some form of violence,^{5,6} likely from an intimate partner or family member.

In both countries, data from national VAWG helplines show a significant increase in calls from the start of COVID-19 restrictions being put in place. The graph shows data from the Kenya 1195 National Gender-Based Violence (GBV)-Helpline and the YONECO hotline in Malawi, particularly since knowledge of the hotlines became more widespread.

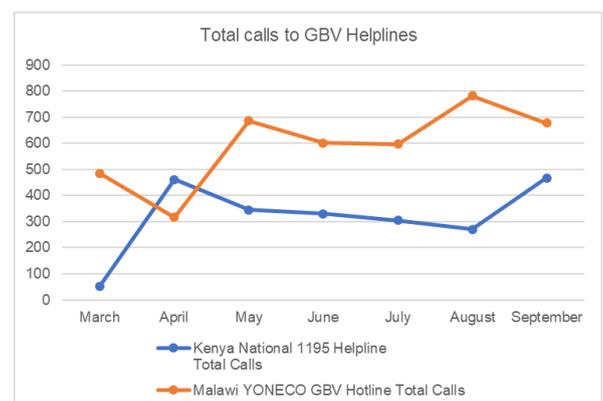


Figure 1: Data from national GBV helplines during COVID-19

In addition to the increased rates of violence, there are major prevention and response challenges. A recent rapid gender analysis in Malawi indicated that around 65% of Malawians think that while civil society and government are operating primarily remotely there is not much that can be done for VAWG

¹ [Violence against women and girls: the shadow pandemic](#), Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, UN Women April 2020

² [Secondary impacts of COVID-19 on VAWG in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), DFID VAWG Helpdesk Research Report, Social Development Direct, June 2020

³ [COVID-19: the gendered impacts of the outbreak](#), Clare Wenham, Julia Smith, Rosemary Morgan, The Lancet, Vol 395, Issue 10227, March 2020

⁴ [COVID-19: Emerging gender data and why it matters](#), UN Women

⁵ Tetra Tech International Development. 2020 (forthcoming), *Independent Evaluation of the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Prevention and Response Programme: Baseline Report*

⁶ [Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, 2014](#)

survivors and 31% are unaware of the availability or functionality of VAWG hotlines or mobile services.⁷ The same is true in some areas of Kenya with regional restrictions on movement.

Our response: policy and programming

Considering these issues, it is crucial for governments and VAWG programmes to provide focused responses to ensure that hard fought for gains are not reversed.

Ensuring VAWG remains at the top of the agenda: The uptick in VAWG cases globally shows this issue deserves to be high on the policy agenda. The rise of the “Shadow Pandemic” has been mirrored by increased political commitment by the Kenyan government in the form of the POLICARE policy and research commissioned by the President of Kenya into the causes of VAWG. This policy established a one-stop shop system for survivors of GBV with the first pilot site set-up in Nairobi with support from REINVENT. In Malawi, in addition to pre-existing policy documents relating to VAWG, the government included strategies and measures for prevention and response to VAWG in its National COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan for the period March to June 2020, which has since been reviewed and updated.

Both our programmes are working with their sector working groups/clusters and stakeholders to capitalise on the heightened awareness and are already seeing gains. In Kenya, in collaboration with REINVENT, the National Police Service has developed the POLICARE policy to provide a one-stop-shop for VAWG survivors to close links in the referral chain. In Malawi, Tithetse Nkhanza has led an effort to revise referral pathways for VAWG survivors, which were recently launched alongside the Minister of Gender. In addition, the programme has developed new strategic partnerships with non-traditional stakeholders such as the Ministry of Disaster Management and Public Events (DODMA) who have been central in coordinating Malawi’s COVID-19 response. By working on policy-level engagement Tithetse Nkhanza have agreed with national government to integrate VAWG mainstreaming into the COVID-19 response and to support the strengthening and continued systematic rollout of safeguarding protocols for government institutions.

To amplify our call to action for survivor-centred policy change, we have joined forces with other development partners to keep this issue in the public eye and maintain pressure for proactive policy response. In Malawi, the gender and COVID-19 taskforce under the Protection Cluster developed advocacy messages on the importance of women’s inclusion in the Presidential Taskforce on COVID-19, the overarching structure for decision-making on the COVID-19 response. Due to these and other efforts, DODMA has given reassurances that frontline survivor services will be designated as essential. In Kenya we have partnered with UN Women and Centre for Rights Education and Awareness (CREAW), by conducting coordinated advocacy to deliver a webinar: *Improving Access to Justice for Women and Girls during COVID-19 and Beyond*.⁸ Others⁹ are now echoing our calls for accelerated access to justice for survivors and the establishment of a special court process to fast-track such cases.

Our recommendations to improve policy further for the recovery phase, which will require a concerted and coordinated effort, include:¹⁰

1. **Don’t cut off support for survivors:** Categorise VAWG service providers as essential services to allow them to stay open safely, their staff to travel to work and services users to travel to access services.
2. **Utilise emergency funding:** Recognise the uptick in VAWG cases as being caused by COVID-19 and the restrictions put in place to minimise the spread. This will allow governments to utilise emergency funds for prevention and response programming.
3. **Increase economic support for women:** Women make up most of the informal workforce. That means they won’t benefit from tax holidays being offered by some governments. Short-term grants for small businesses run by

Survivor Support Fund

Tithetse Nkhanza! works in partnership with Women’s Rights Organisations and Community Based Organisations in our three target districts to operationalise the Survivor Support Fund, which provides resources to VAWG survivors to enable them to access courts, shelters, psychosocial support and other services in line with a survivor-centred approach. Under COVID-19, we have scaled up this fund to enable it to assist more survivors to access critical services.

⁷ [Malawi Covid-19 Rapid Gender Analysis](#), Care International, UN Women, UNICEF, Tithetse Nkhanza!, May 2020

⁸ View the webinar online here: <https://www.facebook.com/305416502808632/videos/284769606075761/>

⁹ Special SGBV courts to speed up justice, Daily Nation, 10 July 2020

¹⁰ Policy Proposals on Addressing the Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 in Kenya, 2020, Gender Technical Working Group

women and the prioritisation of women and girls in emergency social protection schemes would reduce vulnerability to VAWG and get survivors back on their feet.

- 4. Increase awareness and behaviour change programming to prevent VAWG before it happens:** This may include exploring alternate communication channels such as ICT and radio solutions for reaching communities amid ongoing movement restrictions. Prioritising this will have long-term social and economic impacts. The burden on health services will be reduced, girls' education will improve, and more women will enter the labour market, increasing the country's GDP. A decrease in VAWG has benefits for all.
- 5. Support the establishment or continuation of safety circles:** These may be virtual or physical forums for VAWG responders to share information and best practices as well as identifying specific needs to strengthen VAWG response.

To ensure strategically relevant activities respond to new VAWG challenges caused by COVID-19, both programme teams carried out proactive assessments of our usual activities and either adapted or suspended them to focus resources on effectively responding to the uptick of VAWG. A few of our adapted activities are below.

To improve access to services and justice so support isn't cut off, we are working with our partner Sauti Ya Wanawake Pwani (The Voice of Women on the Coast) and the Mombasa County Government in Kenya to set-up and run a situation room for VAWG reporting and referrals, as described in the case study box above. We have also updated an existing VAWG service mapping mobile app, Komesha Dhuluma, to integrate the National VAWG Helpline and a USSD function¹¹ for those without smartphones to enhance access to resources for survivors and reporting. The idea is when a survivor logs onto the app they can see all their local service providers from health care to legal aid.

In Malawi, we are scaling up our Survivor Support Fund, as described in the case study, to enable survivors to continue accessing support, regardless of their socioeconomic or geographic circumstances. In addition, collaboration with the Malawi Judiciary to develop guidance on handling VAWG cases amid COVID-19 will help to ensure that these are still treated as a priority. Through the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other resources to frontline duty bearers, we are enabling them to continue providing essential services in a COVID-safe manner.

We have also adapted our modes of delivery to ensure that we maintain our commitments to beneficiaries with community-based activities. While not a complete substitute for face-to-face engagement, both programmes have increased use of interactive radio programmes in local dialects. This is helping to ensure that hard to reach groups aren't left behind and enables VAWG awareness efforts to continue despite COVID-19 restrictions.

How do we ensure the clock isn't wound back for VAWG survivors long-term?

This article is intended to offer insights from our experience to contribute to broader discussions, evolving evidence and lessons learnt on the "Shadow Pandemic". While the short-term adaptations described have focused on responding to the most critical concerns, this is only half of the issue. The sector must tackle the whole issue by now looking toward the COVID-19 recovery phase, which will bring additional challenges and considerations, to ensure that hard fought for gains are not reversed as the world enters a "new normal".

¹¹ Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD), or "Quick Codes" is a communications protocol used by cellular phones to communicate with the mobile network. USSD can be used for WAP browsing, prepaid call back service, mobile-money services, location-based content services, menu-based information services.

REINVENT GBV Situation Room

Together with our downstream partner Sauti Ya Wanawake Pwani and Mombasa County Government we have set-up and are running a situation room for GBV reporting and referrals. This intervention is already proving useful, it has received calls relating to 269 cases between May and October from across the coastal region. This initiative is already gaining traction with the Kenya Council of Governors who are considering recommending it to other counties.

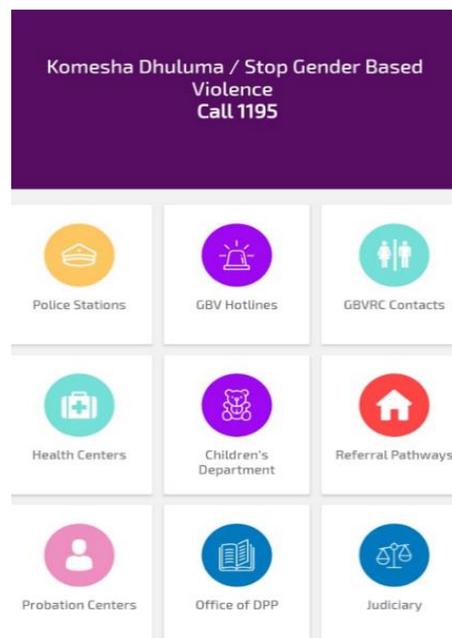


Figure 2: Screenshot of the Komesha Dhuluma landing page

About the Authors

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