

Policy Recommendations on the Linkages between COVID-19, Gender and Climate Change

February 2022

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastatingly crippled economies and weakened the health systems of countries, globally. It has also made apparent the inequalities that exist between developed and developing countries. It is, however, important to look at the various impacts of the pandemic using an intersectional approach and acknowledging the linkage that exists between COVID-19, gender, and climate change.

This document will outline policy recommendations addressing the linkage between these three issues.

Recommendations

1. It is advised that the South African government should prioritize the representation and active participation of women as they have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change impacts in each sector. Women in agriculture, in the manufacturing industry, in the informal sector and many more have been impacted by the pandemic in diverse ways to their male counterparts. Understanding this begins with the understanding that women and men, globally, have been affected differently by the pandemic and climate risks, and as such government recovery plans and policies should reflect this acknowledgment. Through meaningful representation and inclusivity of women in the decision-making and policy-making process, governments will be able to gather data and the human stories behind how the pandemic together with climate impacts has differently affected men, women, children, and people living with disabilities.

President Cyril Ramaphosa stated during his State of the Nation Address on the 10th of February that the government has committed to establishing a comprehensive social compact in one hundred days. This social compact will build on the foundation of the Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan (ERRP), to grow the economy, create jobs, and combat hunger¹. The President further stated that this social compact will have to include every South African and every part of society. It is imperative that the government fulfills this commitment. As the different departments such as the Agriculture Department, Department of Forestry, Fisheries,

¹ <https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-2022-state-nation-address-10-feb-2022-0000>

and Environment and Department of Small Businesses begin to plan for these one hundred days of developing and implementing a social compact, grassroots women organizations, gender experts in various fields, and civil society.

2. Gender-based Violence (GBV), sexual violence, and intimate partner violence have for the longest of time been a serious plague in South African society. With extended lockdowns, the emotional and psychological frustrations of unemployment and poverty, the pandemic can be said to have greatly exacerbated this inherent violence against women. It is recommended that the Department of Health, Department of Social Development, and the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities should form partnerships with organizations such as Bhekisisa Health and the *Where to Care* initiatives to work collaboratively in ensuring that information regarding GBV support services in the public sector is accessible to all women and girls. Funding support and resources should be allocated to GBV shelters, facilities, nonprofits, and legal aid.

The *Where to Care* initiative has created a mobile app that allows care providers to share a link to a map of available sexual and reproductive health, comprehensive family planning, and gender-based violence services. This app provides women and young girls with finding nearby health service providers in their location, assesses health and GBV facility friendliness, and provides verified information about the type of services available at that facility². *Where to Care* relies on facility information from the Department of Health for its successful data collection and to ensure that its map is accurate. It is therefore advised that the Department of Health improve its communication with these initiatives and provide accurate information required to gather data on public health facilities in the country. A resolute task team can be established that will work directly with *Where to Care* on this project. National run awareness campaigns about the *Where to Care* app should also be created and promoted by the Provincial Departments of Health in order to educate and conscientize women and young girls about the *Where to Care* app and its functionalities.

3. It is advised that governments, especially the National and Provincial Departments of Health, should recognize the linkage between the COVID-19 pandemic, women's sexual and reproductive health, and climate change. COVID-19 has increased the barriers to safe and accessible SRHR for women and girls across the continent. Shortages of contraceptives such as the Trigestrel oral pill and the complete discontinuation of the Depo-Provera injection in South

² <https://triadtrust.org/about/programs/c/129>

African public healthcare clinics have been worsened by the global pandemic. The pandemic has caused a disruption of global supply chains and the shift of health resources to COVID-19. Women, especially those that rely heavily on the public healthcare system, have been exposed to heightened risks of HIV/AIDS, unplanned pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases. It is important that the Department of Health does not de-prioritize SRHR and access to menstrual hygiene products for women and young girls.

In putting together, the new comprehensive social compact policies and plans, the government should be clear on how resources will be made available and channeled to SRH services in public healthcare facilities. It is also important that healthcare workers are adequately trained on how to deal with national stockouts of essential medicines such as contraceptives and the disruption of health services during global pandemics and climate change-related disasters. Climate change is a reality and governments need to be proactive in ensuring that health systems are strengthened, especially in most vulnerable communities. These are communities that are often most prone to floods, heavy rains, landslides, droughts etcetera. Women in these communities need to have their basic sexual and reproductive health needs met even during a climate change disaster or global health pandemic.

4. The interruption of the education system due to the pandemic has had significant impacts on the access to equal and quality education and learning opportunities for children globally. The pandemic has disproportionately impacted the educational access of girls and the results of these have been different in various parts of the African continent. In some countries, this has meant an increase in child and forced marriages and exposure to harmful cultural practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). In South Africa, this interruption has manifested itself as a high increase in teenage pregnancies between 2020 and 2021. One would argue that the majority of these pregnancies can be classified as rape and sexual violence cases. The average age group of the reported teenage pregnancies is of girls between the ages of 14 and 19³. The inability for children to physically go to school has unfortunately resulted in children becoming more vulnerable to sexual violence within their homes and communities.

It is advised therefore that as government plans to implement an economic recovery plan, it is crucial that there is a transformative and innovative social compact plan developed by the Basic Education Department. This plan needs to acknowledge how learners have been affected differently by the pandemic from a gender perspective, to propose approaches that schools take

³ <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-africa/teen-pregnancies-south-africa-jump-60-during-covid-19-pandemic>

to intervene in ensuring that they see girl children return to classrooms and to also ensure that online learning becomes more accessible to young girls especially those in rural and township settings.

5. Access to dependable and life-saving information on COVID-19 is important especially to those that may be marginalized because of their citizenship status (displaced refugees and asylum seekers), those in rural settings, and those that may face accessibility issues. The lack of reliable and understandable access to information has led to rumors and conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 virus, its symptoms, and most recently, the COVID-19 vaccines and side effects. This misinformation has contributed to people not applying the correct preventative measures as well as taking vaccines. This has resulted in detrimental effects on the well-being of many people. It is advised that the government should ensure that it tailors all COVID-19 information to the needs of beneficiaries. This means that all information should be accessible in all nine of South Africa's official languages. Moreover, it is recommended that the government should continue to run COVID-19 prevention campaigns as well as a focus on vaccines.

Information about how COVID-19 vaccines can affect the menstrual cycle and reproductive health of girls and women remains unknown to many young girls and women. The Health Department could partner with research organizations such as the Wits RHI to commission research into the effects of COVID-19 on the reproductive health of women. Research outcomes should be shared widely with women and young girls in their local languages using different platforms.

6. Access to clean running water has become a luxury for many South African rural and township communities. South Africa is plagued with devastating corruption and service delivery issues that deprive many women and girls of their basic right to access to clean water and sanitation. In many parts of the country, women and young girls still need to walk long distances to fetch water from river streams when regular hand washing with clean water and soap had been declared one of the most important preventative measures against COVID-19. Some communities have gone months without running water and in some municipalities, water is simply not thoroughly cleaned and filtered for safe human consumption.

The availability of boreholes and water pipes in all communities, especially those that are also most vulnerable to climate-related threats, is paramount. There is also an urgent need for transparency and accountability from smaller municipalities on how resources are used and how certain infrastructure such that, that enables access to clean water is provided and maintained

within communities. National and Provincial governments need to start holding municipalities accountable through accurate audits, instructing providers to cease water disconnections and waive all reconnection fees. Provincial Health Departments also need to ensure that there is a provision of menstrual hygiene products in all healthcare facilities and community clinics and that these are distributed to young girls and women.

Communities, especially women who are often the ones that perform care work, should be taught, and provided with the equipment needed for rainwater harvesting. The government through private sector partnerships can provide households, especially women-headed homes, with JoJo tanks to assist in rainwater harvesting.

7. In the national plans of Economic Recovery from the COVID -19 pandemic, building back better should include sustainable, climate-resilient, gender-responsive and community-driven economic initiatives from an intersectional approach. Greening and climate proofing the economy comes with vast opportunities for all. Given the high unemployment rates in our country and the social dissolution exacerbated by the pandemic, we would recommend large scale investment in green restructuring of the economy, which would enable and foster sustainable enterprises, drive job creation and skills development. This would further lead to improved job quality and increased income, advances in equity, gender equality & social inclusion. We need the right policies, strong social protection policies and investments in renewable energy.
8. Social processes discriminate on the basis of gender, class, ethnicity, age, and disability – climate risks and COVID-19 are widening existing gender gaps. Addressing gender equality as an integral part of climate action and economic recovery is essential and should be complimented by the prioritization of the poor & most vulnerable members of the society. This prioritization can take the form of the establishment of inclusive social dialogues, improved working conditions, and an eradication of wage and skills gap. The enhancement of finance mobilization to meet the growing need for financing climate action is paramount. We need a comprehensive social security system to support the often-overlooked sectors and people in the economy, such as small and informal businesses as well as lower-middle-income and poor households.
9. South Africa has an abundance of renewable energy resources which, under an enabling political environment, can become a central source of social and economic prosperity for communities, families, and businesses in the country. In light of the COVID-19 crisis, substantial political efforts will be needed to rebuild national and local economies and job markets, as well as

restoring and strengthening the resilience of the health system. South Africa's just transition to renewable energy sources can play a strong role in a national recovery strategy to building back better. Moreover, the policy response to COVID-19 needs to be gender sensitive.