

New ActionAid research shows stark reality of Covid-19's impact on young women's lives in the developing world

New research from ActionAid reveals a third of young women in urban settlements lost their jobs and incomes during Covid-19 pandemic related disruptions. The survey of 1,219 young women living in urban areas across India, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa shows that lockdown measures have aggravated the pre-existing inequalities they face.

Grave and sometime deadly impacts are being felt now and will also affect their long-term prospects. **Eight out of ten young women who were studying have been unable to continue their education.**

Job losses have directly impacted food security, with three quarters of the women citing access to food as their most urgent concern, compounded by the majority (65%) reporting a spike in food costs during lockdown. Overall, 58% were forced to take out small loans to pay for their daily needs. In Kenya, personal debt is a much bigger problem with 90% of young women taking on new loans because of Covid-19. The long-term economic impacts of the pandemic will cut deepest with women and young people, the majority of whom work in the informal sector in precarious low paid work.

Marginalised groups face multiple forms of discrimination. In India, where the Muslim community is a religious minority, Muslims were not only the first to be fired, but were also blamed for being super spreaders. 20% of the young women surveyed in India reported that they knew someone who had lost their job because they are Muslim and been blamed for spreading the virus.

Simran Saiyed*, a 27-year old single mother from Gujarat, India, said: *"As soon as the lockdown started, they [Muslims] were given the notice about being fired from their jobs. The notice was firstly given to women, so it felt like dual discrimination, as a woman as well as a Muslim, being blamed for spreading the virus".*

Women and girls have become more vulnerable to violence during lockdown, agreed the majority of young women (58%). The key reasons cited were women being forced to spend more time with their abusers at home as men became unemployed, because of financial dependence on their abusers, and because police and support services shut down. 33% of the women reported incidents of women and girls facing various forms of violence during the lockdown, including domestic violence, kidnap, forced marriage, sexual assault and rape. This trend of violence was particularly high in Kenya (76%) where sexual abuse and early pregnancies were repeatedly cited. Several women mentioned that girls, who were out of school, were forced to exchange sex for money out of economic desperation.

Lilian Masara, a young woman from Nairobi, Kenya, said: *"With no work, most women are forced to exchange sex for money to provide for the family."*

In Kenya, several women also described police being busy dealing with the pandemic and not considering gender-based violence (GBV) cases an emergency. The curfew also made it harder to travel to the police station. They also said the police were corrupt, violent and could not be trusted to help them.

Elona Nabwire, a young woman from Nairobi, Kenya said: *"They [the police] are the ones killing and violating us. How can we report to them?"*

Police brutality was also reported in Alexander, an informal settlement in South Africa, where living quarters are so crowded that people could not stay indoors, especially during lockdown. This led to clashes with the security forces. Eight people were reported to have been killed by the police during

the first week of the lockdown, which at that time was more than the number of deaths related to the virus.

The burden of unpaid care on women and girls increased during the pandemic for 71% of young women surveyed, almost half of whom are spending an additional two to four hours a day on domestic work, restricting their opportunities to work or study. [This comes on top of the four and a half hours of unpaid care that women on average must already manage.](#) Men average just one hour and 23 minutes of unpaid care a day.

Meanwhile access to public services including sexual and reproductive healthcare, education, public transport and clean water has been limited – not only by restrictions on movement, but because of the additional domestic workload on women during the pandemic.

22% of young women were facing difficulty or knew someone facing difficulty in accessing maternal healthcare services during the lockdown period.

Breatter Mosinya Ochogo, a young woman from Majengo, Nairobi, Kenya said: *“There was a woman who was in labour and we took her to the hospital but they refused to admit her because the hospital was full. In the process the lady passed away.”*

Julia Sánchez, Secretary General of ActionAid International, says:

“ActionAid’s new research shows the multiple levels of discrimination young women face, all of which are exacerbated by the pandemic.

“Despite substantial progress following decades of work to raise awareness, today’s world is no safer for women. In fact, the scale of the problem has reached epidemic proportions – globally, [one in three women](#) will be raped, beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime.

“Women’s organisations working in humanitarian settings play a critical leadership role in preventing and responding to violence against women and girls. More funding needs to be channelled directly to women’s groups”

Half of the young women surveyed had not received any government benefits or other forms of social protection — such as subsidies or cash transfers — during the lockdown period.

Yet, [84% of the IMF/World Bank loans](#) negotiated with 81 countries since the onset of the pandemic in March push for adopting tougher austerity measures in the aftermath of the health crisis. These measures are likely to result in further reduction of public services in developing countries, worsening poverty and inequality.

ActionAid’s [Global South Action Plan](#), published at the start of the pandemic, outlines tangible tactics that low income countries can take to reduce their debt burden and expand their progressive tax bases. This could pay for public services and avoid harmful austerity measures, which hit women and girls hardest.

Much more needs to be done to prevent and protect young women from violence. In June, ActionAid’s report, [Surviving Covid-19: A Women-Led Response](#), warned of the disproportionate impact that Covid-19 was having on women. It found a shocking tenfold increase in domestic violence reported by women’s shelters supported by ActionAid. These shelters had to fight to stay open and to be recognised as essential services, while governments diverted funding to respond to the

pandemic. ActionAid is calling for women's shelters must be classified as an essential service during any emergency.

ActionAid is also calling on all governments to ratify the first ever international labour standard to address gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work, which was agreed via an International Labour Organisation Convention in June 2019. By legislating this agreed standard into national law, governments can help ensure workers are protected, even in the informal sector.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

In August 2020, ActionAid interviewed 1219 young women, with the majority (80%) aged between 18 and 30. Among those who were employed (43.2%), only 15.7% were employed full time in the formal sector. The rest (84.3%) worked in the informal sector either as daily wage earners, contractual workers or domestic workers. Most (93.2%) of the young women had received some form of formal education and 20% were married.

*The names of the young women quoted have been changed to protect their identities.