



Insights

Gender-Based Violence Against Women

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Introduction to Gender-Based Violence

Without awareness, there will be less action. Imagine what today's world would be if we did not discuss the COVID-19 pandemic on a global scale, and if conversations about a pandemic that is killing millions of people around the world were swept under the rug. This is the reality of women and girls across the world who are victims of gender-based violence (GBV) as we do not shed light on the hostility they face due to structural violence. In fact, GBV affects more than **30% of girls and women** and is often an unspoken violation of human rights. There are many forms of GBV, such as diminished access to health care, the gender pay gap, and child marriage. Women who are displaced or living as refugees, transgender women, and women living in conflict-afflicted areas are particularly vulnerable to these determinants.

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Double Pandemic: GBV and COVID-19, a Public Health Concern

During the COVID-19 global pandemic, GBV has been exacerbated due in part to enforced prevention measures, such as lockdowns, quarantine, and isolation that has restricted the movement of women and girls outside their homes. Isolation is often a tactic of perpetrators and has increased women's exposure to abusers and tension in the home. Research by the United Nations shows that cases of violence against women have **risen by 25%** during the pandemic, making GBV a major public health concern.

This pandemic gives us the opportunity to deepen our reflection on actions taken against all forms of violence toward women today, especially when the Global Girlhood Report 2020 predicted that due to the pandemic, 500 000 more girls are at risk of being forced into child marriage, and **1 million more** are expected to become pregnant. This could lead to a possible increase in death among girls aged 15 to 19 years, as childbirth is the **leading cause of death** in girls within this age bracket. These young girls are also at risk of **never returning to school**, thereby losing out on comprehensive education as well as the skills and economic freedom that education brings.

Women at the Front Lines of Work in the Health Sector and Home

Because women hold 70% of frontline health care delivery jobs, such as nursing and community health work, they are more susceptible to **increased exposure to the virus**. Moreover, women earn on average **23% less than men**, and women's employment in the informal sector is also higher. According to the **Women and Men in the Informal Economy ILO report**, 89.7% of women and 82.7% of men in Africa were employed in the informal sector in 2018. This reality compromises the financial stability of many families, and it creates a fragile context that furthers the vulnerability of women and girls in the home and increases their economic dependence.

In addition, women perform **2.4 times more** unpaid domestic work hours than men. For women, **increased lockdowns also mean** more cleaning, more food to cook (especially for families whose children were previously fed at school), and more homework to keep up with.

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Women at the Front Lines of Equality

Women all around the world are fighting for their right to live a life free from violence and discrimination. Limited access to resources and care for survivors of GBV in India resulted in a demonstration where more than 3 million women lined up in what was called a *vanitha mathil* or "women's wall," in solidarity against GBV. In Latin America, women protested in the streets under the theme "Machismo es Pandemia," which translates to "machismo is a pandemic." In Spain, calls to domestic violence hotlines rose by 230%, and women have been disappearing with femicide on the rise. Peruvian feminist groups have taken to their governments to hold them accountable for turning a blind eye to the grim statistics that have skyrocketed during this pandemic.

Way Forward for Gender Equity

Gender equality is one of the United Nations' [Sustainable Development Goals for the 2030 Agenda](#), leaving less than a decade to reach equality. [SDG 5.4](#) sets the target for action, but the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the visibility of gender inequity. Given this fierce urgency, what can we do at an individual level to change the mindsets of men and even the women in our families who carry detrimental ideals of gender roles and inequities that have been exacerbated by COVID-19? We can start by giving truth to consent and increase the opportunities for women and girls to tell their stories to remember that gender equality is not a woman's issue but a human rights issue. Through our recently inaugurated [Center for Gender Equity at the University of Global Health Equity \(UGHE\)](#) located in Butaro, Rwanda, we teach all students, from all fields, how to advocate against structural violence and toxic power dynamics against women.

To commemorate the United Nations' [International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women](#), prominent global leaders and experts from diverse backgrounds [discussed](#) the impact of COVID-19 on GBV at UGHE to examine how, together, we can work to strengthen the leadership and advocacy for eliminating gender-based violence during this pandemic and beyond. Through discussions like this, we can rethink the societal norms that create obstacles in opportunities for achieving gender equity. Above all, we must give voice to the voiceless. We must hold governments accountable for implementing policies and strategies that are effective in protecting survivors while improving their access to justice and supporting them holistically. Finally, while the World Health Organization provides a framework for countries on the collection of sex-disaggregated data on testing, cases, deaths, etc for COVID-19, such a framework should also be followed for the shadow pandemic that is GBV. Such data would provide evidence for better gender-sensitive interventions to control the pandemic, and a global coalition to report these key indicators in a sex-disaggregated manner will be vital for inclusive monitoring of violence against all women. Let us work to place serious emphasis on the need to end gender-based crimes.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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