



# East, Central, and Southern Africa COVID Rapid Gender Analysis

## The State of women, ECSA, and COVID

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Africa is relatively low in mid-April 2020, but there has only been limited testing in Africa, and many experts are concerned that Africa could still experience outbreaks on – or beyond - the scale experienced in other regions. In response, governments across East, Central and Southern Africa (ECSA) are imposing lockdowns and curfews, requiring self-quarantine and restricting gatherings and movement of people.

Beyond health outcomes, the wider impacts of the pandemic, including increased burdens of care giving, disrupted livelihoods, increased malnutrition and an increase in violence, will significantly and disproportionately affect women and girls. Gender inequality in the region was already high, especially around women’s leadership, control over resources, and gender-based violence. COVID will amplify these effects and make an already challenging public health response to COVID-19 more complex.

## Key Findings

- Women’s care burdens—already **3.4 times higher than men’s unpaid care work**—will further rise. All of the countries in the region except Burundi have closed schools, so women are taking on higher child care responsibilities.
- Women make up **68% of the frontline health responders ECSA** and the vast majority of them are unpaid. This puts them at high risk of COVID exposure, as well as increased economic hardship.

“The majority of health workers are women and that puts them at highest risk. Most of them are also parents and care givers to family members. They continue to carry the burden of care, which is already disproportionately high in normal times. This puts women under considerable stress.”

*Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka  
Executive Director, UN Women*

- **Population density will likely make COVID move faster.** In the densest urban areas in Africa, there are nearly 12,000 people per square kilometers—more than 5 times the rate that increases disease transmission. ECSA also **hosts 20.4 million displaced people, including 26% of the world’s refugees.** Many of these people live in densely populated camps with little access to water or health care.
- **Underlying health concerns put women at special risk of COVID-19.** Women Africa are already **more likely to die of communicable diseases and maternal mortality** than any other region in the world. The region contains **60% of all people in the world with HIV, and 59% of these people are women.** The HIV epidemic has also left many children in the care of their grandmothers, who have very few resources to cope with this crisis. Additionally, **maternal mortality rates are already among the highest in the world,** especially in Somalia, South Sudan, and other countries in conflict. **25% of women already lacked access to family planning,** and that number will continue to rise as mobility and services dwindle.
- **Women are facing the highest economic risk,** as 74% of women with jobs are working in the informal sector with no safety nets or health insurance. They are most often working in petty trading that will be hardest hit by border closures and restricted mobility. Additionally, **28.5% of families in the region have women in charge without support from another wage earner,** which makes them very vulnerable.
- **Women’s food security will get worse.** 45 million people in the region were already hungry, and closing markets and lower production will increase this. Women produce nearly 70% of Africa’s food, and are also 70% of the hungry. Women in the region do not own the land they farm, and **will face eviction** and have no way to grow food if their husbands die.
- **Gender based violence is rising.** In Zimbabwe, GBV responders have reported that cases have more than tripled. In addition to GBV concerns from being quarantined and increasing stress, ECSA has special concerns Child marriage—already at 42%—will likely go up to cope with crisis, as will transactional sex to get food or aid. Militaries are enforcing curfews and movement restrictions, putting women at higher risk of sexual exploitation. At the same time, resources to respond to GBV are falling.
- **Trafficking and slavery will go up.** ECSA already has 9.24 million people in modern slavery. That’s 23% of the world’s total. As economic stresses rise, this number is likely to go up. Additionally, restricted movement means trafficked women will have less opportunity than ever to seek help.
- **Women have little access to information.** The gender digital divide is highest in Africa, with a 15% gap in mobile ownership and a 41% gap in access to the internet. Women in rural areas, refugee camps, and other hard to reach areas are especially disadvantaged. Women are less likely to be literate than men, with literacy for women as low as 42%.

## Recommendations

- **Look at women’s specific needs.** Consistently collect and analyze sex, age, and disability disaggregated (SADD) data in all preparedness and response interventions.
- **Improve communications plans.** Communications plans around COVID-19, safety nets, and GBV and health services must account for the fact that purely digital communication will miss many women and cost lives. Development actors and humanitarians must come up with appropriate and safe ways to reach women, disabled people, and those living in camps.
- **Include women in leadership and decisions.** All actors must ensure that they create space for women to meaningfully participate in decisions around COVID-19 response and recovery at all levels.
- **Prioritize women on the frontlines.** Actors should put women frontline health workers at the top of the priority list for Personal Protective Equipment and Psychosocial Support.
- **Consider GBV response and sexual and reproductive health as lifesaving services.** Include protection services for children and ways to respond to sexual exploitation and abuse.
- **Invest in food security and economic recovery for the immediate, medium, and long-term.** This includes food and cash distribution, especially to women, as immediate response. It should also include social safety nets for those in the informal sector.

This policy brief summarizes the [Rapid Gender Analysis, East, Central, and Southern Africa Region](#), written by Karl Deering, Everjoy Mahuku, Billy Molosani, and Kalkidan Lakew Yihun on April 30, 2020.