

IMPACT OF COVID-19

JULY
2020

on Women Workers in the
Horticulture Sector in East
and Southern Africa



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ABBREVIATIONS

AMwA	Akina Mama wa Afrika
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease – 2019
EGISA	Every Girl in School Alliance
FEMNET	African Women’s Development and Communication Network
FTA	Fairtrade Africa
Hivos	Humanist Organization for Development Cooperation
ILO	International Labour Organization
KHRC	Kenya Human Rights Commission
LEDRIZ	Labour and Economic Development Research Institute of Zimbabwe
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
RWN	Rwanda Women’s Network
SGBV	Sexual and Gender Based Violence
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WHO	World Health Organization
W@W	Women@Work Campaign
YWCA	Young Women’s Christian Association

01 INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. The impacts of the virus span across every sector as economies are crumbling, health systems are strained, and poor communities are facing a livelihood crisis. This surging global economic crisis has further widened the existing gaps in countries' preparedness and response systems. Some of the measures instituted by governments across the world include but are not limited to social distancing, travel restrictions, curfews, closure of schools and markets, and ban on public gatherings and other meetings have further exacerbated the prevailing economic crisis and misery of the poor whose livelihoods are characterized by a hand-to-mouth existence.

With the world's economy largely relying on agriculture, the horticulture sector is among the top foreign exchange earners for most African countries. However, the performance of the horticulture industry across African countries has drastically dwindled in the last six months following closure of markets in Europe. For example, the Netherlands, which is among the largest markets for flowers, banned most of the activities that make use of flowers such as weddings, funerals, parties and other celebrations as a measure of curbing the spread of the virus. This has led to massive job loss in the African producing countries, pay cuts, application of unpaid leave and seemingly a suspension of labor rights obligations on the part of employers.

It is against this background that Hivos, under the Women@Work Campaign commissioned rapid studies in collaboration with implementing partners in Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Malawi,

Zambia and Zimbabwe to assess the impact of COVID-19 on women workers in the horticulture sector in the six countries. The findings of the various country assessment reports provide critical lobby and advocacy avenues that are imperative towards shaping responses by various stakeholders including governments, businesses, civil society players and trade unions among others.

While the immediate focus and priority in response by the governments in the six countries where the rapid assessments were conducted is public health, it is becoming increasingly important to address the implications of the crisis on people's livelihoods as the pandemic continues to cause unprecedented disruptions at personal and household levels. Governments have taken various measures to support the most-at-risk populations within their countries. In Kenya, the president announced a tax relief for all low earning workers with a gross salary of up to USD 240 while the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (Kenya) extended its cash transfer program to the more than 350,000 workers who had been rendered jobless by the pandemic. Such measures will be helpful in institutionalizing diversified, dignified and inclusive response strategies that safeguard and protect the workers, especially those in precarious employment.

This report, which is a consolidation of the six country reports, offers a brief description of how the assessments were undertaken, the key findings and concrete recommendations to governments, business, trade unions and civil society organizations. The recommendations are geared towards strengthening response to ensure protection of women's human and labor rights during and after the pandemic.

02

METHODOLOGY

The rapid assessments were conducted between April and June 2020, targeting women workers and farmers in horticulture and floriculture farms in Kenya (April), Uganda (May), Rwanda (June), Malawi (April), Zambia (June) and Zimbabwe (May). Overall, more than 260 women workers from at least 30 farms in the region were reached. The country studies also benefited from interviews with key informants and industry stakeholders from governments, trade unions, farm management, employers' associations, local administrators, host communities and civil society organizations.

Noteworthy, the assessments were conducted under arduous circumstances following directives by the governments in the various countries to contain movement in and out of select areas with a view to curbing further transmissions. These necessitated mixed approaches of data collection. For instance, countries on total lockdown such as Zimbabwe, agriculture was recognized as an essential service thus workers and stakeholders in the sector had free access while in Uganda where

public and private transport was suspended, farms were forced to house their workers by erecting temporary shelters or modify daycares into sleeping camps. As a result, surveys were conducted purely via phone interviews. In countries like Kenya where movement in and out of Nairobi Metropolitan was restricted, the survey also employed virtual data collection techniques such as telephone calls and emails as the researchers were all based in the metropolitan area with farms on the outskirts. In Malawi and Rwanda, the survey was flexible and used mixed approaches which consisted of one-on-one interviews and telephone calls while in Zambia in-farm face-to-face interviews were conducted under strict WHO and state regulations. The various health protocols and government regulations were observed where physical interviews were conducted.

03

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted women workers in the horticulture sector socially, economically and psychologically, with the effects spiraling to their homes. The following findings were recorded in the six countries:

3.1 SECTOR OUTLOOK

The flower industry has been ravaged by the effects of the pandemic since its emergence due to the resultant lockdown in Europe where most African countries export their flowers and vegetables. This blow has further been compounded by closure of the Dutch auction where most of the flowers from Eastern and Southern Africa are sold. As a result, many growers are forced to either close down, downsize the workforce or engage them on different terms (compulsory unpaid leaves and salary cuts) as the main task entails uprooting of overgrown flowers for disposal in Kenya and Zimbabwe as a result of reduced demand for the produce in most floriculture and horticulture farms. In addition to this, Zimbabwe farms incurred significant financial losses in finding alternative, yet expensive air freights, limited shipments with low market demands.

The impact of COVID-19 on horticulture (vegetable and fruit farms) and floriculture farms is diverse with the latter being severely bruised in magnitude – as flowers are considered luxuries against vegetables which are an essential produce. This finding is confirmed in Kenya where the vegetables and fruits sectors have not been adversely ravaged by the pandemic. The finding is buttressed in Malawi whose major horticultural export earners are soya, beans and peanuts and therefore has not experienced the impacts of the pandemic in the same magnitude as Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. It is also important to note that countries relying entirely on exports for their produce like Uganda, Kenya and Rwanda were severely impacted as countries like

Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi sold their produce locally to supplement the demands in the local markets.

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In a sector that boasts of approximately 70% women workers, the pandemic has reduced the workforce by 50%. With reduced number of workers in farms and/or departments, the workload has since doubled with survival wages and gruesome working environments. The devaluation of women's labor and exploitation due to lack of power, skills, alternative income, poor representation and demanding domestic responsibilities has made it difficult to negotiate for better pay for work performed. For instance, in one of the farms in Kenya, the workforce in green houses was reduced from 10 to 4 with similar scenarios noted in other departments, in Uganda, out of a workforce of 445, one farm retained only 145 workers who the company comfortably encamped while in Rwanda, 49% of the workforce in the sampled farms were laid off. The situation of increased workload for reduced pay was reported generally in all the six countries as the retained workers grappled to accomplish tasks that would have otherwise been distributed and completed with 100% workforce. In the interviews, workers

from Kenya and Uganda reported that this arrangement has led to an increase in the number of workers falling sick and women lamenting increased fatigue and stress levels as they live in constant fear of termination under glaring poverty lines.

The ambush on the sector forced the farms to take abrupt measures towards mitigating the harshness of the crisis. The primary strategy in this case being retention of a sizeable and manageable workforce that they would be able to remunerate under set terms. For the retained workers the farms still employed extra measures of operation in addition to the social distancing and water, sanitation and hygiene directives. A social distance directive of 1-1.5 meter and 60% transport capacity led to introduction of rotational schedules and shifts in some farms. In Kenya, a farm introduced night shift for its pack house department; in Zimbabwe, employers provided food hampers and excess produce to its workers; and in Uganda, the farms set up on-farm shelters for workers to restrict their interaction with the public. It was a heart-warming gesture to have retailers step in to ameliorate the situation of workers in their supply chains as was reported of the Waitrose Foundation supporting workers with food supplies in Kenya.

3.2 WORKERS' UNDERSTANDING OF COVID-19

General awareness of the virus and preventive measures was recorded across five countries except in Malawi, where knowledge on COVID-19 was recorded at 40%. This state of awareness did not come without a sense of panic at the onset of the pandemic since awareness levels on symptoms were low at the beginning. Workers noted their employers and other key stakeholders such as trade unions and health and safety departments had increasingly intensified awareness campaigns to curb possible

transmissions and also adopted measures to protect them from infection. Some of the measures adopted include: provision of free reusable masks, installation of hand washing points in various strategic areas within the companies and fumigation of the companies' facilities including vehicles. In Zimbabwe, however, social distancing remained a mirage as people worked in close proximity, ferried in overcrowded trucks and there has not been changes in their working arrangements. In addition, it was noted that while hygiene measures were instituted at the workplace, little was done in the living camps within and outside the companies and hence the danger of contracting the virus at home or the camps and spreading it in the workplace remained probable.

3.3 LOSS OF EMPLOYMENT

This is reported in all the six countries. In Kenya, more than 30,000 temporary workers had lost their jobs while more than 40,000 permanent workers were sent on leave in March 2020. Uganda reported that close to 4,000 (30%) workers were rendered jobless while in Rwanda, 468 workers in three farms, representing 49% of the farms' workforce, had lost jobs at the time of the assessment. In six farms sampled in Zambia, the rate of job loss stood at between 50-60% while Zimbabwe projected imminent job loss of approximately 50% of non-permanent workers and those who live off-farm. In Malawi most of the farms surveyed were small and medium enterprises who lacked commercial export permits. On average, 50% of the workforce in the six countries has been laid off as a result of the pandemic.

3.4 SHRINKING WAGES/INCOMES

Workers who have been retained in employment have had their salaries cut or sent home on unpaid

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leave. In Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda, those retained have suffered a 50% pay cut or been subjected to a rotational fortnight schedule that results in two weeks' pay. Women workers entirely rely on their meagre earnings from the farms thus any disruption on their jobs is likely to sabotage their livelihoods and well-being. In Rwanda, 78% of the respondents confirmed that their pay has been revised downwards in the wake of the pandemic with only 22% indicating that their pay has not been affected. In Malawi, women farmers reported a decline in incomes by up to 25%. This was blamed on lack of markets, a drop in price of produce at the 'farm gate', movement restrictions which saw reduced volumes of produce making it to the market, reduced demand for seasonal work and limited opportunities for piece work which is undertaken by most women farmers. Although farmers in Zimbabwe had committed to ensure worker wages and other health benefits are paid, the commitment could be reversed by prolonged periods of lockdown.

3.5 SOARING COST OF FOOD AND OTHER HOUSEHOLD SUPPLIES

The pandemic has seen various governments institute lockdown measures in several parts of their countries in order to contain the spread of the virus. Resultantly, women workers have reported staring at starvation while a longer term challenge relating to food availability, looms. In all the six countries, respondents reported reduced access to food due to closure of open-air markets and introduction of new borders. The reduced supplies have seen the price of food and other basic supplies rise by the day. In Rwanda where household expenses are reported to have decreased, it is noted that families had to either compromise the quality of life by applying austerity measures to reduce household expenses or respondents lived in rural homes where they got food directly from the farms. This finding resonates with the situation in Malawi, Kenya and Uganda where workers reported to be skipping meals in view of shrinking wages. In Malawi it was reported that 38% of the households surveyed had reduced their food intake to one meal in a day. Further in Uganda, incidents of common illnesses were reported to be high against a backdrop of increased food insecurity. Similarly in Malawi, women farmers who participated in the study noted that food security was a major concern owing to

reduced yields and insufficient resources to prepare for the next season. In Zimbabwe farmers introduced food support initiatives such as food hampers, tuck shops and health supplements to boost the immune system of workers. While these measures were helpful in ensuring workers access food and basic commodities, respondents pointed out that the credit limit was too little to afford them decent purchase. The threat of food insecurity is particularly felt by the laid off workers (especially women who are household heads) who have depleted their savings and have no alternative source of income.

3.6 LIVING CONDITIONS - HOUSING AND ACCESS TO WATER

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), agricultural workers are the poorest of the rural poor. This population that contributes to one of the top foreign exchange earning sectors survives on minimum wages of approximately USD24 (Zimbabwe), USD25 (Uganda) and USD 67 (Kenya) thus their income can only afford them accommodation in low resource areas with limited amenities. With 50% job losses and reduced wages, the crisis has further induced untold difficulties and pressure of accumulating rent arrears, hindering women's access to decent housing. This means that adherence to social distancing and observance of general hygiene remains a mirage¹. In Rwanda, the majority of the workers interviewed could afford some form of rented or low class owned accommodation but were not gainfully employed as the majority lived in the rural set-up where the farms were also located. In Kenya, terminated workers who were previously housed by their employers and benefited from free clean water, power and daycare services for their children reported to have been evicted without notice forcing them to incur additional unplanned expenses for rent and utilities. In Malawi, Zimbabwe and Kenya, access to water was hampered during the pandemic owing to heightened demand for the commodity. There were fewer water access points implying that observance of regular hand washing and general hygiene was a major challenge for most families as it came with extra spending. It is imperative to also note that workers in all the farms in six countries have access to unlimited supply of water, soap and sanitizers which are strategically positioned for hand

¹ https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_008067/lang--en/index.htm

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washing as compared to their homes where the shared piped water is rationed while borehole facilities are also a distance.

In Uganda however, the restriction of movement forced employers to transform the daycares into temporary shelters for the retained workforce in adherence to social distancing requirements and restriction of contacts with the public. It was however reported that women workers who had little babies could not be accommodated in the temporary shelters. Many others declined the offer to stay in the shelters as that meant separation from their families.

3.7 GENDER DIMENSION TO THE PANDEMIC AND THE RISE OF A SHADOW PANDEMIC

With containment and/or lockdown directives in the six countries, women workers were increasingly sheltering at home where an increase in the strain on household incomes was reported. Living in cramped conditions further exacerbated the strain leading to a spike in sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). In Uganda, for instance, 3280 cases of gender-based violence (GBV) had been reported to the police in a span of one month, between March 30th and April 28th, 2020. The ban of private and public transport in Uganda further limited access to medical and emergency services such as maternity, thus predisposing women to imminent risk of delivering babies at home or even worse, delivering still births. In Malawi, SGBV was described as ‘the second pandemic’ and although it was still too early for comprehensive data to be reported, there were fears that SGBV would be on the rise during the pandemic. In Kenya, cases of SGBV were generally on the rise but the spike was not experienced around flower growing zones. Zimbabwe reported an increase in the cases and linked the spike mainly to disruption in accessing reproductive health

services due to restrictions in movement. This meant that women who could not access contraceptives could no longer freely engage in conjugal affairs thereby becoming victims of violence. Rwanda and Zambia did not report cases of SGBV.

3.8 HEIGHTENED PHYSICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL STRAIN

In the six countries, women were noted to be more adversely affected due to their dynamic dual role in society. Patriarchal adherence to gender roles has compounded the marginalization of women through increased obligations to undertake breadwinning, domestic work, child care and homeschooling leaving them overwhelmed and frustrated. Workers interviewed across the six countries reported an increase in burden of care and significant pressure for women due to increased workload, tension at work and financial inadequacy which continues to strain women’s familial relations further predisposing them to gender based violence and mental imbalances. With the suspension of field interventions for community based organizations, women staying at home lack subsidized community-based medical and psychological attention as they cannot afford the services in private facilities. A section of women workers in Uganda forfeited their jobs as they could not relocate to the farms at the expense of their families while in Zimbabwe, most on-farm women workers were married to artisanal miners and therefore could not interact with their spouses due to restricted movements in the farms. Although cases of SGBV were not reported in Rwanda and Zambia, the findings indicate that despite majority of respondents being married, the division of domestic labor remained overwhelming on women thus inducing psychosocial strain and general fatigue.

3.9 TRADE UNIONS IN LIMBO

Notably, trade unions are key bargaining units and legal outfits instituted to represent workers. However, this pandemic has left them exposed as most of them have been unable to negotiate for fair terms of dispensing with workers where this becomes inevitable. The agricultural unions in Zimbabwe reported denial of entry into some of the farms by company management and were limited to less effective virtual engagements. Although the biggest agricultural union in Kenya, the Kenya Plantation Agricultural Workers Union (KPAWU), negotiated rotational work schedule in most farms, in other instances the union came off as a feeble outfit. In Uganda, the union was more connected to its members and managed to put up a robust advocacy campaign on COVID-19 through mainstream and social media mainly negotiating retention of workers on lesser pay and redressing the need for job security and access to social security among others. In Zimbabwe, the pandemic has created new opportunities for trade union activism in maintaining their thrust for decent work for workers and social justice in

general leading to increased visibility. Key among the interventions instituted by GAPWUZ were development of e-learning and education materials, release of COVID-19 radio jingles in local languages, upscaled the use of workplace structures and committees in representation, correspondence with the Ministry of Labor in pushing for wage review and risk allowances for farm workers, farm visits and lobby for the enactment of safety and health code into a statutory instrument, enhanced campaign against SGBV and writing of news articles to shape public opinion in the agriculture sector among others. In Rwanda, union membership and visibility was low. From the sampled respondents, 60.9% were not unionized while affiliate members constituting of 39.1% reported that the union was more vibrant in sensitizing workers to observe and comply with government measures of preventing the spread of COVID-19, an intervention that did not meet workers' expectations. The table below provides a further comparative analysis of the country situations:

PARTICULARS	SIMILARITIES	DIVERGENCE
Horticulture produce	Cut flowers, fruits, fresh vegetables in Kenya, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe	Addition of chilies, beans and avocados in Rwanda; soya, beans and peanuts in Malawi
Gender representation	More women workers (65-70%) in the farms in Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe	Higher number of male workers (70%) in the farms in Rwanda
Intensity	Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Zambia and Zimbabwe hit hard by the pandemic	Malawi relatively hit compared to the rest of the sampled countries
Containment measures by the governments	Partial lockdowns, dusk to dawn curfews, restricted movement, social distancing, ban of public gathering in Kenya, Malawi and Zambia.	Total lock down in Zimbabwe (though agriculture was classified as an essential service), Rwanda and Uganda during the assessment. In Malawi the lockdown was uplifted through a High Court injunction
Company mitigation strategy	Massive lay-offs, salary cuts, unpaid leaves, rotational work schedules, provision of reusable face masks, sanitizers, hand washing points, temperature screening, social distancing and weekly sensitization meetings.	Sheltering of workers in Uganda and Zimbabwe to restrict their interaction with the public. Introduction of night shift for pack house workers in one of the horticulture farms in Kenya and introduction of food support initiatives by the government of Rwanda and farm employers in Zimbabwe
Trade union in farms	Full presence in the floriculture sector	Little or no presence in the horticulture farms

04

BEST PRACTICES

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4.1 SUPPORT FROM INDUSTRY PLAYERS

Key industry players in the supply chain; Fairtrade Africa (FTA) and Waitrose Foundation have supported workers in Kenya through monthly cash tokens and food packages respectively, to cushion them from the current hardship.

practical for all workers, especially women workers, as it meant separation from spouses and children. This calls for companies to be pragmatic in devising strategies to ensure that marginalized groups such as women are not excluded from accruing benefits from the response strategies.

4.2 INNOVATION

In one of the horticulture farms in Kenya, the management introduced night shifts as a means of managing the dusk to dawn curfew for its pack house workers, expanded the grading area to achieve the 1.5 meter social distance between workers and hired extra buses to transport workers in compliance with 60% passengers' capacity. In addition, one of the flower companies in Kenya introduced a variety of breeds in their farms in order to tap into new markets and therefore retain the workforce.

In Zimbabwe, the Commercial Farmers Union provided farms with tapped water bins, 10 liters of hand washing soap and 10 liters of sanitizers while farm management offered food hampers, excess produce and health supplements to boost their workers immunity during lockdown.

With the lockdown and restriction of movements in Uganda, many farms resorted to encamp their workers by transforming the day cares into temporary shelters. Thus, besides their pay, the employers provided workers with accommodation, food, sanitizers and medical care. This was done to restrict their interaction with the public over fears of contracting the virus. However, it was noted that this initiative was not

While many farms uprooted and disposed of overgrown flowers, select farms in Zimbabwe and Kenya identified areas of corporate social responsibilities by donating some of the flowers to old people's homes, orphanages and hospitals. In April, the Government of Kenya sent 300 bouquets to the United Kingdom in solidarity with frontline workers in hospitals in a campaign dubbed 'Flowers of Hope'. This in return would open up market for exports in the UK as well as enhance diplomatic relations between the two countries.

05

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the assessment depict that mitigation measures need to be accountable, inclusive and sustainable. The intersecting oppressions faced by women during the pandemic continue to reveal existing structural inequalities. It is against this that Hivos seeks to mobilize a multi-stakeholder call to action, undertaking appropriate legal, policy and advocacy actions in response to the evident hardships.

5.1 GOVERNMENT

5.1.1 MASS TESTING OF WORKERS IN HORTICULTURE SECTOR

Governments should introduce and/or expand mass testing in labor intensive sectors among other highly populated sectors such as the horticulture farms. This should include provision of free testing kits, personal protective equipment (PPE), free quarantine services for those who have tested positive and free healthcare for workers who fall ill irrespective of their employment terms. Governments should also ensure standardization of protective equipment to guard against employers purchasing substandard materials which may further predispose workers to contracting the virus.

5.1.2 EXPANSION OF SOCIAL PROTECTION AND OTHER SAFETY NETS

The existing social protection programs should be expanded to unconditionally cater for vulnerable workers who have lost their jobs and those in low income employments such as the horticulture sector. This should be anchored within policy frameworks where governments' definition of vulnerable populations is expanded to include workers in precarious employment and those whose jobs have been disrupted by the pandemic. Additionally, governments should introduce economic rescue and stimulus packages to protect the socio-economic rights of the most-at-risk populations. Reskilling of workers and increased access to women funds and

entrepreneurial programs would help women to adjust and cope with the effects of the pandemic. Rwanda report has recommended its government to adopt a range of strategies to alleviate the burden of employers and workers, particularly women workers in coping with the pandemic. These include supporting employees who are laid off, continuous citizen sensitization, supporting employers/farms through establishment of a recovery plan for the horticulture sector, and revisiting the existing labor legislation in line with the COVID-19 revelations.

5.1.3 SUSPENSION OF MANDATORY STATUTORY DEDUCTIONS

States should suspend, for workers whose jobs have been adversely affected by the pandemic, the deductions made to national healthcare and social security schemes as well as revise taxation and debt policies. These measures would ensure workers have disposable income to attend to the most immediate needs such as food and basic hygiene. The government of Kenya has waived income tax for all workers earning up to a gross of USD 240. This policy directive is laudable and should be emulated by other countries. As essential service providers, the government of Zimbabwe should include agriculture workers (including horticulture) in payment of incentives.

5.1.4 CONTROL OF PRICES FOR ESSENTIAL COMMODITIES

Governments need to regulate the prices of food and other essential commodities to ensure such raises are only triggered by natural supply and demand forces and not price manipulation. This remains one of the most effective ways to protect vulnerable populations from further exploitation in the wake of a deeply grueling crisis.

5.1.5 CURBING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)

Protection and safeguarding of children, girls and women from gender-based violence must be emphasized and prioritized in policy and practice

and all stages of response against COVID-19. Governments should institute special measures to protect and cushion women in crisis, especially where the shadow pandemic is fostered by response measures such as lockdowns, cessation of movements and curfews. To mitigate the surging violence at homes, the government must invest in rescue shelters and institutionalize reporting and referral mechanisms for victims of GBV and their dependents. In addition to protection against GBV, there is need for access to sexual reproductive and health rights (SRHR) and mental health services to be improved through introduction of mobile clinics in the marginalized areas to complement the traditional health centers.

5.1.6 EVIDENCE-BASED STUDIES ON PANDEMICS AND TARGETED RESPONSE

Pandemics are unpredictable and from them many lessons are derived. COVID-19 has exposed deep seated structural inequalities and poor response mechanisms. Governments have an obligation to ensure continuous knowledge generation to inform national and sectoral dialogues, policy responses, as well as steering and encouraging critical debates on social development implications of, and solutions to the raging pandemic.

5.2 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

5.2.1 AWARENESS CREATION

The civil society organizations should invest in strengthening dissemination of Covid-19 information to the grassroots through simplified, inclusive and more accessible mediums such as community instruments (e.g. use of public address systems and local civic and social gatherings), use of vernacular radio stations and publication of information, education and communication (IEC) materials in local languages. The strategic dissemination of information should be geared towards closing information gaps created by the existing single-sided narratives perpetuated by governments.

5.2.2 MOBILISE GLOBAL MARKETS TO SUPPORT WORKERS

Public and private partnerships should be fostered towards responding to the depreciating ability of workers to withstand the rigors of the pandemic. This can be achieved through mobilizing retailers

from the global north to offer direct support to workers in their supply chains. For instance, the Waitrose Foundation was reported to have donated food supplies that would last a period of three months, to workers (from their affiliated farms) in Kenya.

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5.2.3 DESIGN OF INNOVATIVE RURAL ECONOMIC LIVELIHOOD PROGRAMS

With the precarious livelihoods of many workers in the horticulture sector, and especially women workers, it is imperative for development partners to set up innovative and sustainable programs that will support the development of rural economic livelihoods as well as training on financial literacy and start-up income generating activities.

5.2.4 LOBBY FOR POLICY REFORMS

Civil societies' role is to hold governments accountable on commitments made to citizens, and also to push them to adopt more progressive and inclusive solutions to challenges through robust advocacy campaigns and lobbying for policy reforms. Review of existing work-related policies such as redefining or expanding the meaning of vulnerable persons to include the unemployed, workers who lose their jobs during the pandemic and those that have suffered severe pay cuts. In Zimbabwe, the horticulture sector farmers highlighted the need for a standard flexibility in retaining the foreign currency for an indefinite period as exercised by tobacco farmers while in Uganda the government should revise taxation and debt policies by institutionalizing a moratorium on loan servicing to financial institutions to remotely relieve workers and

businesses of loan repayments until normalcy resumes. This will foster inclusive and evidence-based reforms drawn from key findings and lessons learnt during the pandemic.

5.3 BUSINESSES

It is imperative for business to understand that the manner in which they respond to prevent, mitigate and address the human rights impacts of Covid-19 will be key in the extent to which they can maintain trust in their own supply chains. Businesses are called upon to be more innovative and identify ways of retention of employees even in difficult times. In May 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, called on businesses to 'build back better' by applying a vulnerability lens in their decisions moving forward. Businesses must learn from the pandemic and enhance their resilience to respect and protect workers' rights even in the face of pandemics.

According to the High Commissioner, the companies that get their response to the crisis right are those who focus first on the most vulnerable². This report echoes her remarks that urge businesses to focus on the human impact of the pandemic and not merely the economic impact.

5.4 TRADE UNIONS

5.4.1 SOCIAL DIALOGUE IS VITAL

Trade unions must remain grounded on effective social dialogue with governments and employers. This should result in swift, robust and concrete demand-driven actions and solutions that ensure compliance with existing employment laws and regulations.

Trade unions also have a role in sharing credible information with their members. Continued development of user-friendly materials on preventive and mitigation measures, WHO guidelines including other related issues such as prevention of gender-based violence (GBV) and mental health are critical for farm workers.

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protect workers' rights.
”

² <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/HC-tells-business-leaders-build-back-better-focusing-on-the-vulnerable.aspx>

06

CONCLUSION

The country reports unearthed huge power imbalance in the labor sector and brought to the fore structural barriers and inequalities that continue to subject workers, especially those in precarious employment, to vulnerability.

retained have been subjected to massive pay cuts or been retained without pay altogether. The social and economic ecosystem is greatly disorganized as the wellbeing of hundreds of thousands of workers remain at stake.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are unprecedented and continue to be felt around the world. The pandemic has left untold suffering in its wake as lives around the world continue to be hugely disrupted. As public healthcare systems crumble and economies continue to reel under the weight of the pandemic, it is the world of work that is, perhaps, the most affected. Thousands of workers in the floriculture and horticulture sectors have lost employment while those who have been

But it is the women workers who continue to bear the brunt of the pandemic as many of them narrated across the six countries. Majority of them had to introduce austerity measures which saw them and their families skip meals, relocate to smaller houses and contend with abusive intimate partners as the strain on household incomes continued to be felt. The quotes below as picked from the various country reports provide a glimpse into the situation:

“I would rather die of corona than die of hunger. Social distancing is simply not practical.”

– Woman farmer, 33, Dowa, Malawi.

“I have not been affected but SGBV cases are normal in our localities. We are only afraid the pandemic may compound the situation as men may turn wild as they are not used to staying at home while some are agitated by job loss and collapse of businesses as a result of COVID-19.”

– A woman in Kenya.

“Children are at home, in our limited space, of just two rooms for the seven of us. They are frequently disorganizing the house. Their appetite has increased. They are eating too much! We also have to dig in people’s gardens to get money for buying some food and basic needs. This is in addition to the home routine of cleaning, cooking and washing. We also use a lot of water and soap, hence increased expenses and work.”

– Woman from farm 1, Uganda.

See the links below to the various country reports for full details:

1. **Rwanda:** Dr. Rutebuka Balina (Rwanda Women's Network), Impact of Covid-19 on Women Workers in the Horticulture in Rwanda (July 2020) <https://womenatworkcampaign.org/document/impact-of-covid-19-on-women-workers-in-the-horticulture-sector-in-rwanda/>
2. **Uganda:** Margaret Kedi, Leah Eryenyu and Eunice Musiime (Akina Mama wa Afrika), Impact of COVID-19 on Women Workers in the Horticulture Sector in Uganda (May 2020) <https://womenatworkcampaign.org/document/impact-of-covid-19-on-women-workers-in-the-horticulture-sector-in-uganda/>
3. **Kenya:** Mary Kambo (Kenya Human Rights Commission) and Dorothy Otieno (African Women's Development and Communication Network), Impact of Covid-19 on Women Workers in the Horticulture Sector in Kenya (April 2020) <https://womenatworkcampaign.org/document/impact-of-covid-19-on-women-workers-in-the-horticulture-sector-in-kenya/>
4. **Zambia:** Young Women's Christian Association and Women for Change (WfC), Report on the rapid assessment, conducted to determine the impact of COVID-19 (June 2020)
5. **Malawi:** Wilson Chivhanga (Every Girl in School Alliance), Rapid assessment on the impact of COVID19 on women horticulture farmers in Malawi (May 2020)
6. **Zimbabwe Reort:** The Labour and Economic Development Research Institute of Zimbabwe

