

THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN KENYA AND UGANDA.

As we commemorate World Mental Health Day in Uganda, we reflect on the Covid-19 pandemic programming done by the Government which was focused on non-disabled people. People with disabilities especially women and girls along with the elderly, were left on the peripheries to fight for access to services without consideration for their specific vulnerabilities. With the pandemic came different challenges that greatly affected the women with multiple disabilities. It should be noted that the lack of services to address disability specific needs, specifically the psychosocial wellbeing, negatively affected their mental health. During this period, WPI received several complaints of sexual and gender-based violence against these groups but it is a struggle to obtain justice for them since the law usually views them as unreliable witnesses/complainants which makes them even more vulnerable to abuse. This then has an impact on the mental health of survivors and their families in various capacities. Uganda adopted a Mental Health Act in 2019, one that recognized rights under the UNCRPD. Guardianship laws which essentially seal the fate of these groups ensuring independence and individuality would be difficult to achieve. A disability is either a physical or mental health issue affecting the way one moves, senses or does an activity. Women are also more likely to suffer from a disability with it being reported that 15% of the total female population lives with some form of disability¹.

During the lockdowns imposed by the government, it was difficult for many women with disabilities to access medical facilities and also access basic needs which include; water, food and health services. Following the first lockdown, that found many Ugandans unprepared, some women with different disabilities did not understand what was going on because the information was not properly relayed to them by the responsible parties. Some of them could not be able to access health care services which included testing for covid 19. It was also difficult for those who rely on physical support to get efficient and healthy support. An interviewee expressed herself; *“As a person with disability, the COVID situation has continued to push me to a very different corner of operations especially the fact that I can no longer have full trust in whoever could help me navigate around by holding my hand and I am also sure that they don’t trust my health so no one can just hold my hand anyhow”*². There is also a limited number of psychologists and psychiatrists attending to mental health issues in Uganda so the covid-19 made it even harder to access the few in the country because of the lockdown and the limited mental health centers in the country.

There was also an issue of lack of access to information. Most of the women with disabilities who were doubly affected being already women in the vulnerable bracket, there was limited information disseminated to them to enable them to know all about covid

¹Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2019, The National Population and Housing Census 2014 – National Analytical Report on persons with disabilities, Kampala, Uganda

² Wickenden, M., Wakoko, E, Shaw Thompson S.J, &Rohwerder, B (2021) The situation has exposed persons with disabilities to double edged pain: People with disabilities ‘experiences of the covid 19 pandemic in Uganda

19 thereby putting their lives at risk and those of people around them. Furthermore, there was the fact that most medical or public health information did not favor people with disability because there were no options of information that were specifically made for them. Some of the women with disabilities interviewed during the Article 48(Kenya) and Women's Probono Organisation research, both organizations that advance women's rights and access to justice stated that most doctors did not know sign language. This made it hard to communicate with some of the women.

Some were imprisoned without being heard and others were not even given the right to legal representation. It should be noted that the fact that some could not communicate and did not understand the lockdown rules made them easily susceptible to being caught on the wrong side of the law. The police officers and local defense unit (LDU) were to an extent not as patient and critical in their investigation as they should have been. Some women with mental disabilities got arrested and were not adequately heard or given the right to have legal counsel.

Women with disabilities faced a high level of gender-based violence (GBV) during the covid 19 pandemic. According to the National Union of Women with Disabilities of Uganda, while about 80% of women report having experienced some form of GBV during the lockdown, the rate among women with disabilities was 95%.³ This clearly is due to the fact that there was less concentration given to one of the vulnerable groups that include women with disabilities who are doubly affected. It was also observed that the perpetrators took advantage of the lockdown and the women's inability to communicate resulting into some of the crimes against women and girls with disability going unreported. It was after the side effects like pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases were discovered that it was evident that an offence had been committed.

Also, during the pandemic, the women with disabilities faced the inability to access sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) services. These included sanitary towels and reproductive education which also includes family planning. Due to the abrupt lockdown and limited health teams allocated to them, women with disability could not access some of these SRHR services putting them into health risks which included unplanned pregnancies and unhealthy periods and consequently this had an effect on their mental health.

The women with disabilities were affected economically since most of them could not participate in any income generating activity due to the lockdowns and denial of job opportunities as a result of stigma towards some who had mental disabilities. This limited the women's ability to fend and buy some of the basic needs.

It is with the above information that it is imperative on the state to ensure disability inclusion in Sexual and reproductive health rights, freedom from violence and related rights. It should be noted that the state should endeavor to make sure that information

³ Willman, A, Atamanov, A, Myers, C.A Gendered Impacts of the COVID-19Crisis in Uganda and Opportunities for an Inclusive and Sustainable recovery

presented by women with disabilities should have long-term effects and be binding. The state should prioritize hiring more psychologists and psychiatrists who should be stationed at all regional health centers. All the women with different disabilities should be included in preparation of pandemic state crises support plans as this will enable them to state what they need and have a voice of their own. They are human beings with human rights like any other able-bodied person.

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ABOUT WPI

WPI is a feminist non-profit organization registered in Uganda to advance women's rights through legal empowerment, legal representation, research, and knowledge sharing.

ABOUT A48

Article 48 Initiative (A48) is a legal and advocacy organization that promotes access to justice for persons with mental disabilities without discrimination.