



COVID-19 Gender Equality Setbacks

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The global pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of women and girls, especially in Africa, setting back significant processes made around the world to close gender gaps.

Across Africa, women are experiencing the highest rates of job losses. 92% of women in Africa earn a daily wage through the informal economy by selling produce, meals, or crafts. These women are experiencing significant financial setbacks during the global pandemic due to a decline in tourism and curfew restrictions. Even where women have formal employment opportunities, patriarchal social norms and traditions in some societies dictate that a career be secondary to a woman's primary place as a housewife. This demand for women to prioritize home life over their professional lives has increased during the pandemic.

In a recent report, the Center for Global Development stated that, in 2020, women globally took on 173 additional hours of unpaid childcare compared to 59 additional hours for men during the same period. The study noted that the gap widens in low- to middle-income countries, with women caring for children more than three times as many hours as men. In addition to the responsibility of childcare, women are also tasked with caring for the sick. With health systems stretched, many people with Covid-19 are being cared for at home, adding to women's home responsibilities and putting them at greater risk of becoming infected.

The pandemic and associated lockdowns have led to financial insecurity, inability to flee abuse, social isolation, crowded homes, and reduced support networks. This has led to a surge in domestic violence and teenage pregnancies. According to the United Nations' *The Shadow Pandemic: Violence Against Women and Girls and COVID-19* report, approximately 243 million women and girls between the ages of 15 and 49 have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner. The United Nations reported that in 2020

about 48 million women and girls, including 4 million pregnant women, required humanitarian assistance and protection. In sub-Saharan Africa, there are at least 608,000 girls at risk of child marriage, and 542,000 girls are at risk of early pregnancy.

The pandemic has emphasized how interconnected our lives are and calls for intersectional approaches to tackling gender inequality. One such response comes from Wider Church Ministries/Global Ministries church partners in southern Africa. Since the start of the pandemic, the South Africa Synod of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa has hosted weekly Thursdays in Black online meetings to raise awareness about gender inequality and gender-based violence. The Thursdays in Black campaign, created by the World Council of Churches, is a global solidarity movement to resist attitudes and practices that permit rape and violence. The South Africa Synod's weekly gatherings bring awareness of the heightened risk of violence against women and children during the Covid-19 lockdown. Their meetings bring together church members, South African ambassador staff across the world, and international partners.

Black has been an essential color in my wardrobe since my childhood. In high school, my thespian friends and I wore black to distinguish ourselves from other school clicks. Today, I wear black every Thursday as a visual sign of my solidarity, joining the advocacy efforts of communities in the United States and worldwide against gender-based violence and gender inequality. Gender inequality and gender-based violence have always been pressing issues, but the need for robust advocacy is greater now than ever before. Like women in other parts of the world, African women and girls play critical roles in responding to COVID-19. How can we honor their work and sacrifices? We have an opportunity to end gender-based violence and get back on track with narrowing the gender gap that expanded during the pandemic. So, I invite you to join me in adorning yourself in black on Thursdays and participating in this global movement.

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