



## WOMEN VULNERABILITY AND SOCIAL WELFARE DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN IN NIGERIA

**Helen Jibike FATOYE**

*Department of Sociology,  
Faculty of the Social Sciences,  
University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria  
Email address: [ajibikefatoye@yahoo.com](mailto:ajibikefatoye@yahoo.com); [fatoye.helen@dlc.ui.edu.ng](mailto:fatoye.helen@dlc.ui.edu.ng)*

### ABSTRACT

*The COVID-19 pandemic shocked the world creating problems and affecting human life negatively. It has erased the gains made in gender advocacy and women rights in the last two decades, thereby increasing women vulnerability in Nigeria. This paper discussed increasing women vulnerability in the COVID-19 era in Nigeria and social welfare options to deal with these vulnerabilities. Loss of livelihood, increasing gender-based violence and sexual abuse were seen as the major risks for women. Lockdown and social distancing measures and Lack of accessibility to support centers were seen as factors that facilitate women vulnerability during this period. The paper recommends that government create a strategy or plan of action solely dedicated to curb women vulnerability. Priorities should be given to women in the post-COVID-19 recovery plan and states should endeavour to copy Ekiti state Shaming strategy to deter abusers of the female gender*

**Key Words:** COVID-19, Social Welfare, Women Vulnerability, Lockdown.

### INTRODUCTION

The occurrence of the COVID-19 as pandemic has affected all facet of human life negatively. Globally, more than 14 million people have been infected as at the time of writing, with Nigeria having more than 5546,000 cases as at 8<sup>th</sup> of July 2020 (NCDC, 2020). The emergence of the virus has different implications for diverse social categories and groups (Ramos, 2020). While for some, especially technology and pharmaceutical industries, it indicates more profit, for others it creates psycho-social and economic challenges (Ozili, 2020). While extant data indicates that men have high higher rate of infected cases and deaths, however, women and the girl child have felt the negative effects of the pandemic more than other social groups (Chakrabarty, 2020; Lopez and Bro, 2020; Ramos, 2020; Rana, 2020; Usher et-al, 2020; UNAIDS, 2020). These are further worsened by social distancing and lockdown measures taken to check the spread of the virus as jobs were lost across all economic sectors and social activities were put on hold (Ozili, 2020).

These measures led to debilitating effects on the economy especially the informal and service sector both of which form the most important sectors in Nigeria. Official statistics from the Bank of Industry (2018) and National bureau of statistics (2020) indicated that women are dominant in these sectors with over 70% in the informal sector and about 80% in the service sector. The two sectors are characterized by low income with many having little or no saving, absence of pension and health insurance packages which can provide social safety net. This indicates that the volatile nature of these sectors makes women vulnerable during period of disasters or outbreaks. For many women in these sectors, the pandemic and the measures taken have led to complete loss of livelihood and dignity (Ramos, 2020).

Apart from the loss of livelihood, women face more issues during this period. Daily news reports are rife with cases of rape, domestic abuse and gender-based violence especially with the social isolation and quarantine measures (Plan International Report, 2020). Health wise,

because of women active involvement in healthcare delivery mostly as frontline staff, they are susceptible to work hazards caused by the outbreak. The pandemic is likely going to reverse many of the gains in women empowerment in the last two decades.

It can be argued that women become more vulnerable during period of disasters or outbreaks of diseases (McLaren,Wong, Nguyen and Mahamadachichi, 2020; UNODC, 2020) than the men. This is due to the fact that more responsibilities are given to women during events of this nature; this according to McLaren (2020) builds on their “pre-disease vulnerability” where there are already pre-existing inequities in gendered burden. These new burdens can be long lasting even beyond the end of the disaster itself.

Disasters and diseases outbreaks such as the COVID-19 can significantly alter the gender relations between men and women, drawing upon women vulnerabilities and increasing burden (McLaren et-al, 2020). Women are likely to enjoy increasing decision making process in relations to socio-economic, health activities both in the homes and outside. Nevertheless, these increasing responsibilities often results into decline in the wellbeing of women thereby worsening their vulnerabilities to health hazards, increasing burdens at home, gender-based violence etc. Given Nigeria’s low rank in the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender wage gap index 2020 (Nigeria is ranked 117<sup>th</sup> out of 153 countries).

Many women in the paid employment sector have experienced drop in their wages due to pay cuts, with looming layoffs likely to affect women more (AbdulRasaq & Lukman, 2020). Access to paid and formal employment will become more difficult for many qualified women due to the pre-existing gender ceiling. This will increase the vulnerability of women during this period. More worrisome is the fact that crises or disasters such as the present COVID-19 outbreak often result into increase in the workloads of women at the home front and as well as in the sphere of work. As the major health provider in the house, women often find it difficult dealing with ensuring good health in period of disease outbreaks in the family while at the same time fulfilling other roles such as income earning, taking care of members of the family etc (Usher, Bhullar, Durkin, Gyamfi & Jackson, 2020). This can lead to decrease the ability to balance their time in these different roles and sphere. When they become ill as a result of contract a disease, they are not likely to engage in activities that may reduce these burdens.

Since the outbreak of the virus and its entry into Nigeria, advocates of gender equality and civil society organizations have been concerned about the secondary effects of the virus of women and the girl child (Civil Societies Organisations, 2020; UN, 2020). There have been concerns over the wellbeing and safety of women during this period. As indicated earlier, women are becoming increasingly vulnerable and pre-existing vulnerabilities still exist. While several social welfare programmes and packages were provided by governments at various levels to offset perceived effects of different measures, of which many women would likely be the main beneficiaries (Eranga, 2020). More worrisome are some categories of women who face pre-existing socio-economic challenges elderly women and widows which are likely to be complicated by the virus. With the lack of social welfare programmes for widows, they are likely to face more issues than other women.

This paper contributes to the discourse on women and COVID-19 pandemic by looking at the vulnerabilities of women in Nigeria and to what extent social welfare programmes provided addressed their vulnerability.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **David Stoesz Theory of Social Welfare**

Stoesz (1989) theory is predicated on the assumption that vested interests play vital roles in social welfare in the society. He identified two categories of interests- structural interests and marginal interests. He defined social welfare as “societal provision of economic, social and health benefits to members of the society who are unable to access these benefits themselves.

He sees structural interests as “existence of set of legal, political and economic institutions who serve dominant interests in the society that they are already seen as legitimate- the only way people can access services in the society. According to him, these interests have become invariably enmeshed with the structure of the society hence they are regarded as “structural interests” he identified four categories of dominant interests. Dominant group exemplified by welfare bureaucrats or government welfare bodies, challenging exemplified by private or for-profit organizations interested in providing welfare services (CSR). Other categories include-emerging exemplified by professional individuals/bodies interested in welfare services and repressed which is exemplified by community based and non-Profit organizations.

He sees marginal interests as the interests of people who are the actual beneficiaries of the welfare services. The different groups or individual who are vulnerable, neglected, marginalized, excluded or face oppression from the larger society. Women in a patriarchal society like Nigeria are examples of such of individual or form a category of group of with marginal interest. He argued further that the status of this group is an indication of the social welfare sector in the society. In his words, “their interests are subsumed by dominant interests” to justify this assertion, he argued that marginal groups may try to benefit from society by accessing public or societal regulated welfare programmes. However, he argued that this creates a conundrum. Government welfare programmes are controlled by civil servants he called “welfare bureaucrats” who have no iota of the conditions of the marginal groups. These programmes are created based on dominant interests the interests of these bureaucrats rather than the needs of the interest groups. Therefore, availability and accessibility to these services is determined by these government agents/welfare bureaucrats who have different interpretation of the needs of these marginal groups or different ideology from these groups. Hence the conundrum, unfortunately for the marginal groups their needs cannot be cater for since it is not in consonance with the structural interests.

However, members of marginal groups are trying to work within the structural interests such as increasing representation of women in politics and decision-making process, establishing NGOs that cater for the interests and welfare of women etc. Nonetheless, he argued that this has not corresponded to increase in the status of marginal groups. They have not been able to influence the structural interests as it still remains rigidly patriarchal male dominated. To improve the conditions of the marginal groups, there is the need to critically understand how marginalized they are by conducting studies and this should be done by professionals

### **COVID-19 OUTBREAK IN NIGERIA**

The outbreak of coronavirus disease of 2019 started in Nigeria on February 27, 2020 when an Italian man tested positive. From the index case in Lagos, the disease spread to every nook and cranny of the country within the space of less than three months. As of July 23, 2020, the total number of cases due to the virus is 38,948 and 833 deaths. COVID-19 has negative effects including panic buying and inflation of prices of goods and services. Price of essential medicinal commodities such as nose masks and hand sanitizers increased due to high demand. Prices of food items also surged in many parts of the country (NAN, 2020). Surge in criminal activities was also reported in some areas in cities during the lockdown (Adekanye, 2020; Sunday, Taiwo, Olatunji and Aikulola, 2020). Furthermore, educational activities were disrupted due to the ban on opening of schools and this affected the salaries of teachers working in private schools. The weak digital economy affected students most especially in public schools. Many lost their sources of income when private companies lay off their workers (Oyebade, 2020).

The public health care system was overburdened and negative effects of the pandemic were also felt in the aviation sector as both local and international flights were banned which led to loss of jobs and significant cuts in revenue. The tourism industry was also severely affected (Ozili, 2020).

## **WOMEN VULNERABILITIES IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA**

There is no doubt that the lockdown owing to the COVID-19 outbreak has in no small measure increased the vulnerability of women not only in Nigeria but in other climes. This vulnerability of women amidst COVID-19 is not peculiar to Nigeria as the United States of America, Singapore United Kingdom and other nations authorities have reported increase in women vulnerability due to increase in the reported cases of domestic violence against women and girls amidst the lockdown. Regrettably, women and young girls in many developing countries like Nigeria are more vulnerable during the lockdown (Jessica and Camron, 2020). The lockdown has become a major challenge in the sense that women who ordinarily go to work in the morning and come back in the evening are now being locked down with an abuser they've been living with and have been trying as much as possible to avoid overtime. Women's vulnerability occurs mostly in, loss of means of livelihood, gender-based violence and sexual exploitation (Umukoro, 2020). Before the pandemic, Nigeria has been amongst the nation with high prevalence of gender-based violence incidents with over 30% of girls and women who are aged 15-49 years in one time or the other having been a victim of sexual abuse (Jessica and Camron, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic which necessitated a lockdown amongst many nations and many states in Nigeria did not leave girls and women the same (Plan International Report, 2020). As the cases and incidences of gender-based violence against women and young girls has increased. According to Jessica & Camron (2020) since 30 March 2020 when Nigeria government imposed the lockdown, there has been an upsurge on reported cases of gender-based violence. The statistics shows that for 23 out of 36 states in Nigeria in which data are available. This shows a monthly increase of 149% in reports of gender-based violence since the introduction of the lockdowns on 30 March 2020 by the Nigeria government (Jessica & Camron 2020).

The urban poor who are mostly women and who depend on a daily wage to feed themselves and their families have been very hit by movement restrictions to contain the spread of the virus (Chakrabarty, 2020). Most vulnerable to these are women who are breadwinners of their families, widows, single parents (Jessica & Camron 2020). For instance, according to UN news report (2020), one of the women they interviewed, fish-seller and mother-of-four in Lagos, Nigeria whose means of livelihood had been affected by the COVID-19 lockdown had this to say:

When the Government said nobody should go anywhere, I couldn't go to the market. But when I couldn't go to the market, there was no money to feed my children sometimes and that is very painful. My children received food when they were going to school but when their schools closed, that became an extra burden. But since they gave use some food, it has helped us a bit (UN News, Report, 2020).

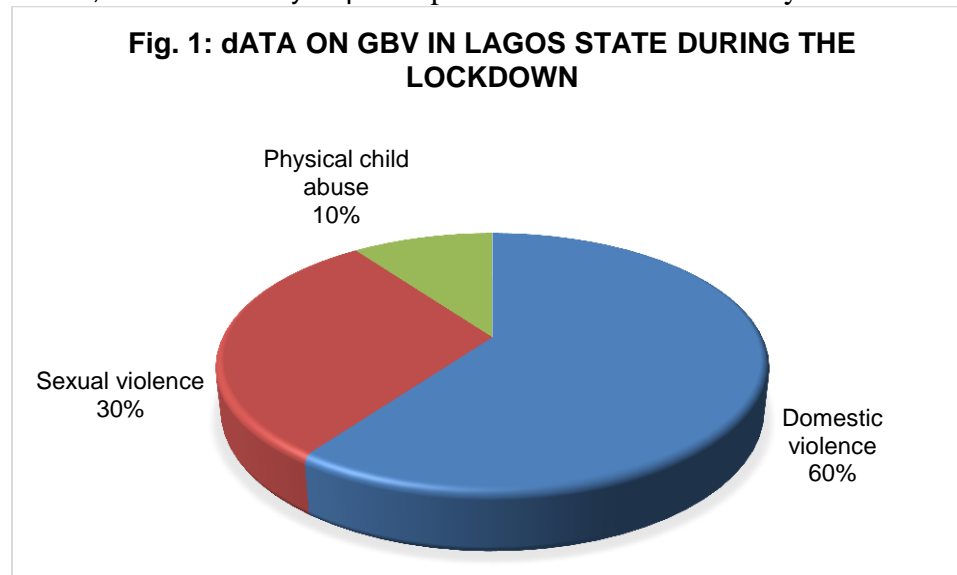
This shows the plight of women who are breadwinners amidst the COVID-19 lockdown. The above narration is just an example of what an average woman who is a single mother, widow, breadwinners in Nigeria goes through in this COVID-19 lockdown period.

According to the data gathered by Jessica and Camron (2020) the number of reported cases of violence against women and girls in the three (3) states (Lagos, Ogun and Abuja) increased from 60 in March 2020 to 238 in April 2020, an increase of 297%. Whereas, in Benue, Ebonyi, and Cross River states, which were placed under less stringent lockdowns by their respective local governments, the increase in cases was only 53% between March 2020 and April 2020. As a matter of fact, in Ebonyi state, where the governor refused to lockdown the state totally, the state witnessed a decrease in the number of cases of reported violence against women and girls from March 2020 to April 2020.

Accordingly, the director of Lagos-based Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC) Akiyode-Afolabi (2020) noted that since the lockdown started, the most common gender-based violence reports observed by the organization have been spousal violence, landlord-tenant violence, neighbour-to-neighbour violence, and parent-children abuse. Others are homeowner-house help violence, boyfriend-girlfriend violence, violence on widows, police-sex worker violence, police-citizen violence, child rape. The organisation indicated that women and girls are mostly the victims of this gender-based violence (Umuokoro, 2020).

This assertion is supported by the Lagos Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team. According to Mrs. Titilola Vivour-Adeniyi, who leads the team, at the peak of the lockdown in Lagos, the group on average received 13 new cases of gender-based violence daily. In March alone, the team received 390 reports. Mrs Vivour-Adeniyi said there has been 60 per cent increase in domestic violence, 30 per cent rise in sexual violence, and 10 per cent increase in physical child abuse. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, this number is likely to grow with multiple impacts on women's wellbeing, their sexual and reproductive health, their mental health, and their ability to participate and lead in the recovery of our societies and economy.

**Fig. 1: DATA ON GBV IN LAGOS STATE DURING THE LOCKDOWN**



**Source: Lagos State Domestic and Gender Response Team Personal Communication 2020**

Less discussed are the vulnerabilities women who face social exclusion prior to the pandemic faces. These socially excluded categories of women include elderly women, widows and single mothers or women who give birth out of wedlock. While elderly women maybe faced with neglect and lack of care and attention by younger relatives, widows and single women often face stigma in the society, these women are some of the poorest in the society (AbdulRasaq & Lukman, 2020). Nigeria does not have any social protection/welfare systems for these socially excluded women. The vulnerability these women face will be further worsen by the virus, with these women solely responsible for their needs and children needs, many of these women will loses their means of livelihood during this period. For the widows and single mothers there may be increase in care responsibilities due to closure of schools and social distancing measures. This may result into reduction of working time for many of these women and loss of income. More worrisome are widows who lost their spouses during the pandemic, with the restrictions culture places on new widows, their level of vulnerability may be higher during this period. Many would be subjected to inhumane treatments by relatives of the late spouse under the pretext of





upholding cultural or religious rites pertaining to widowhood. This increases the social-economic and psychological hardships these women will face during this period.

### **THE IMPACT ON SOCIAL WELFARE ON WOMEN'S VULNERABILITIES DURING COVID-19 LOCK DOWN IN NIGERIA**

The concept of social welfare is predicated on the need for society and governments to ensure that members meet basic human needs and provide support and services to meet these needs. According to Hansan (2017), social welfare refers to range of services and activities provided by government and non-profit agencies to help socially exclusive, vulnerable or needy groups who are unable to help themselves. It also includes activities and resources designed to enhance and promote the wellbeing of these groups: and enforce to eliminate or curb social problems these groups may face. According to the United Nations (2020), women form a diverse social category that face social exclusion in patriarchal societies and are vulnerable during disasters, crises and diseases outbreaks. They are likely to feel the impacts of such disasters or crises more than other categories, hence the need for social welfare or protections programmes and systems for them.

With the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria, measures were taken by governments at both the federal and states levels to curb the spread of the virus. However, these measures which include social distancing, partial and total lockdown led to hardships for the general populace. As a result, social welfare programmes that were exclusive and existed for targeted groups prior to the lockdown were become more open for other groups. New welfare packages and palliative measures were rolled out by Federal and states governments and donations by the private sector and individuals. Some of these measures include the Trader-Moni, Market-Moni, Farmer-Moni soft loans given by the CBN, Bank of Industry, Bank of Agriculture and the Nigeria Export and Import Bank (Eranga, 2020). Others include the conditional cash transfer were given to the poorest households under the National social investment programme under the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development. After the lockdown was suspended, the National Assembly implored businesses to refrain from sacking workers; the Banking and Oil sector were ordered to reinstate sacked workers.

Trader-Moni and Market-Moni as social welfare programmes refers to soft loan schemes targeted at providing small investment for petty traders, markets women, youths and artisans in Nigeria. The scheme is a part of the Government Enterprise and Empowerment programme (GEEP) of the Federal government (Trader-Moni, 2020). Interest free loans ranging from 10000 to 100000 are given to petty traders depending on the conditions stipulated by government. The scheme started in 2018 with a pilot conducted with 6 states and 12 markets selected. With the entry of the virus into Nigeria, it was extended rapidly and currently about 32 states and 40 urban markets across the 6 geopolitical states have benefited from the programme.

Women constitute a larger percentage of petty traders, market women and artisans. While there are no accurate statistics on the number of women who are petty traders and artisans, it is estimated that 65% of people in the informal sector are women (NBS, 2019). Otekhile and Matthew (2017) also estimated that women constitute 85% of those involved in street trading in Lagos state. An indication of this is that women would be the major beneficiary of these schemes. However, the conditions proposed to access the loan scheme may limit many women in the informal sector from accessing the loan. Some of the conditions include the trader to be a member of market cooperative unions, posses a means of identification, BVN and registration online. With high level of illiteracy among market women, many of these women would not access this loan. While the scheme claimed to have provided loans for over 2.5 million traders and others in the informal sector since inception (Trader-Moni, 2020), this assertion cannot be verified.

Just like Trader-Moni, Farmer-Moni is also a loan scheme under the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP). This initiative provides access to interest free finance for the agricultural sector. According to the NBS (2019) women constitute about 85% of people who are involved in the agricultural sector, majority of whom are subsistence farmers and farmhands. An indication of this is that women would likely be the major beneficiaries of this scheme. Nevertheless, the same challenges that limit women from benefiting from Trader-Moni and Market-Moni will also affect women from benefiting from this scheme as well.

Likewise, in response to the daily reports on the increasing rate of rapes, sexual abuse and harassment faced by women and the girl child since the lockdown began; several states initiated several laws to curb these incessant abuses. The Lagos state established a gender violence response team (DVRST) to carry out physical interventions, using phones, social media, 24/7 web chat to reach people in abusive situations who need help. In exceptional cases, the team goes out to rescue children who may have been abused, and women who need assistance in abusive relationships. Oyo state did the same by establishing a gender-based violence rapid response teams while its bill as a legal entity is still in the state House of Assembly. Ekiti state went further by passing the sexual offender public register law which publicly displays convicted sexual offenders on billboards and posters around the state (Erezi, 2019).

### **CHALLENGES FACED IN DEALING WITH WOMEN'S VULNERABILITIES IN THE COVID-19 LOCK DOWN PERIOD IN NIGERIA**

It has been established that women vulnerability increased during the in this COVID-19 and this was further exacerbated by the lockdown and social distancing measures taken to curb the spread of the virus. Nevertheless, different states in the country have established social protection systems to help deal with this vulnerability especially gender-based violence and forms of sexual abuses. However, challenges persist. The lockdown affected accessibility to support centres. Many shelters for victims and survivors were closed during the lockdown (Jessica and Camron 2020).

In the same vein, accessibility to justice and other forms of legal redress for the victim have become difficult. The slowdown of legal procedure and increasing backlog of cases in the justice system due to the lockdown has limited the use of restraining order or other legal protections for the victims. The inability of many states to domesticate the VAPP Act (2019) means that many survivors may not get justice for domestic and gender-based violence. In states, where the Act has been domesticated, lack of political will may affect proper implementation of the act. Security operatives bias and cultural norms may affect seeking redress for abuses of all kind perpetrated against women.

Furthermore, there is huge distrust between government and the general public, an indication of this that people would not believe government intentions. While governments claimed to have given soft free loans to many in the informal sector including women, lack of information about the beneficiaries may give the impression that these interventions are either fake or have been embezzled. Likewise, there is no plan of action or strategy either at the Federal or State level that is solely aimed at dealing with women vulnerability especially social excluded women like widows, elderly women, and single mothers

Another major factor inhibiting the fight to curb vulnerability is dearth of coordination amongst relevant agencies, key stakeholders, and lack of/poor implementation of the legal frameworks combined with entrenched gender discriminatory norms which has in no small measure inhibited government and civil society efforts to address gender-based violence especially during this COVID-19 lockdown (Jessica and Camron, 2020).



## **CONCLUSION**

This paper discusses the challenges and vulnerabilities women faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also discussed the factors that facilitate these vulnerabilities and social welfare packages targeted at dealing with these vulnerabilities as well as the challenges. A major limitation of this paper is that women's personal testimonies and personal narratives concerning the vulnerabilities they face during the pandemic are not documented.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

It has been established that women vulnerability is heightened during the pandemic and the conditions adopted to curb the spread of the pandemic are also some of the conditions that gives leeway to increase women vulnerability. To curb the vulnerability of women, the following recommendations were made:

- There is need to conduct a comprehensive nationwide study that captures vulnerability women face in the COVID-19 era. The findings should be used to prepare a plan of actions to deal with women vulnerability and address women needs effectively
- Governments at various levels should study the impacts of available response measures on gender issues. There is the need to communicate and assure women of their protection and social welfare systems available to women during this period.
- Priority should be given to women especially widows, female agricultural workers, women in the informal and service sector disabled and single mothers in the distribution of relief, social welfare measures and socio-economic recovery plans.
- Social protection services for women should be seen as essential services and given premium. Workers this sector should be deemed essential workers.
- The criminal justice system needs to be strengthened to become more gender responsive. Priorities should be given to access to justice for women at risk.
- Psycho-social support services should be provided for survivors of gender-based violence. This should include medical examination, psychosocial support, legal and security protection services.
- The Ekiti state shaming strategy for sex offenders and abusers should be adopted by other states.



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