

AGENTS FOR CITIZEN-DRIVEN TRANSFORMATION

The Agents for Citizen-driven Transformation (ACT) programme works with civil society organisations (CSOs) to enable them to be credible and effective drivers of change for sustainable development in Nigeria.

Our work focuses on strengthening the system of CSOs, networks and coalitions to improve their internal, external and programmatic capabilities. We also focus on providing a platform for multi-stakeholder dialogue for an improved, effective and inclusive regulatory environment for the operation of CSOs in Nigeria.

ACT will be implemented in 10 states, selected across the six geo-political zones in the country. Implementation is being rolled out in phases in selected states. We are currently working in Adamawa, Edo, FCT, Kano, Lagos, Rivers, and Sokoto.

The four-year programme (2019-23) is funded by the European Union and implemented by the British Council.

This case study and other ACT publications are available at www.justice-security.ng

CSOs' EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO COVID-19:

ADDRESSING AN INCREASE IN GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE



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WHY THIS CASE STUDY?

This case study illustrates the impact of a coordinated civil society action to amplify the voice of vulnerable populations, like survivors and victims of violence against women and girls, and to enhance government responsiveness to address the issue. The change brought about by this work has the potential to positively influence the behaviour of Nigerian citizens in relation to issues escalated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Funded by the
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the British Council



INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and related government measures is having great impact in Nigeria. Since 27 February 2020 when the Federal Ministry of Health confirmed Nigeria's first case of COVID-19 in Lagos state, there have been fears as to what the spread of the pandemic could mean for citizens, particularly for vulnerable populations, like women and girls, who are estimated to represent 49 percent¹ of the population in Nigeria.

COVID-19 and related government responses affect people differently and magnify already high levels of inequality along age, class, disability, gender, income, and other lines. Girls and women are disproportionately affected due to gendered power relations and persistent and structural inequalities.²

Research from other contexts as well as Nigeria show the impact health crises can have on society. The most significant short-, medium- and long-term impacts of the pandemic may lay beyond the health sphere and be most stark when it comes to key issues, such as levels of violence against women and girls (VAWG).³

BACKGROUND

Levels of VAWG were already high in Nigeria before the pandemic. It is reported that up to one third of Nigerian women have been subjected to some form of violence and one in five has experienced physical violence.⁴

This crisis has been elevated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with widespread evidence that VAWG has sharply increased since the beginning of the pandemic, with women, girls, and people with disabilities in particular at greater risk.⁵ The number of reported cases of VAWG in Nigeria increased by 56 percent between March and the first part of April 2020, in just two weeks of lockdown.⁶

“

We have been inundated with increased reports of sexual and domestic violence since the lockdown started in late March 2020,” said Titilola Vivour-Adeniyi, leader, Lagos state government-run Domestic and Gender Violence Response Team.

“In March alone, we received 390 reports. There was a 60 percent increase in domestic violence, a 30 percent rise in sexual violence, and 10 percent increase in physical child abuse.” ”

Intimate partner violence is more likely and severe as known drivers including rising poverty, food insecurity, household tensions, and mental health issues are exacerbated.⁸



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Violence committed against children may be rising given the increased stress parents are under, coupled with the loss of sense of self many men have experienced. There are also indications of more marital rape and higher incidence of non-marital sexual violence.

Moreover, sexual exploitation and abuse rises during times of hardship.⁹

At the same time, decreased access to support makes escaping and recovering from VAWG more difficult. Government restrictions, worries of going to the hospital, reduced economic circumstances, and fears of security force harassment mean people cannot easily seek help. VAWG services and referral systems struggle to function with staff worried about the potential for infection and risks from increased criminality.¹⁰

1. Source: World Bank Databank 2020.

2. Source: Managing Conflict in Nigeria (MCN), "Research on the Impact of COVID-19 on Conflict, Gender and Social Exclusion in North East Nigeria, July 2020.

3. Source: Managing Conflict in Nigeria (MCN), "Research on the Impact of COVID-19 on Conflict, Gender and Social Exclusion in North East Nigeria", July 2020.

4. Source: British Council and UK Aid, "Gender in Nigeria Report, 2012.

5. Source: Pulitzer Centre, "Amidst COVID-19 Lockdown, Nigeria Sees Increased Sexual and Gender Violence, June 2020.

6. Source: Federal and State Ministries of Women's Affairs, as published in the UN Women, "Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria during the COVID-19 Crisis: The Shadow Pandemic," May 2020.

7. Source: Pulitzer Centre, "Amidst COVID-19 Lockdown, Nigeria Sees Increased Sexual and Gender Violence, June 2020.

8. Source: Managing Conflict in Nigeria (MCN), "Research on the Impact of COVID-19 on Conflict, Gender and Social Exclusion in North East Nigeria, July 2020.

9. Source: Managing Conflict in Nigeria (MCN), "Research on the Impact of COVID-19 on Conflict, Gender and Social Exclusion in North East Nigeria, July 2020.

10. Source: Managing Conflict in Nigeria (MCN), "Research on the Impact of COVID-19 on Conflict, Gender and Social Exclusion in North East Nigeria, July 2020.

APPROACH

At the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak, ACT performed a rapid assessment of its CSO partners and their ability to conduct effective advocacy campaigns during emergencies. The programme then delivered virtual training sessions for over 60 CSOs to strengthen their advocacy skills in various areas.

Following the trainings, gender-focused CSOs grouped together in a coalition to jointly address and create awareness about the increasing cases of violence against women and girls in Kano and Lagos states, with ACT support.

To better understand the increasing numbers, a monitoring plan was developed to track cases and statistics, relying on data available from the Nigeria Police and the Federal and State Ministries of Gender Affairs.

The coalition then coordinated a mass outreach campaign funded by a small grant from ACT. The primary aim was to raise awareness about the increase in VAWG during the COVID-19 pandemic, using evidence from the data collected and translating the data into easy-to-read infographics.

The communication also highlighted ways to control anger and stress, facilitated conversations around VAWG, and encouraged vigilance and reporting including by friends, neighbours, and family.

The secondary aim was to engage government stakeholders on the severity of the issue so that it would adequately prioritise VAWG in its COVID-19 response and strengthen available services for women who experience violence during COVID-19. Targeted communication was specifically designed for government to call for the action required to address the situation.

Examples of campaign graphics:



RESULTS

CSOs worked from a concrete evidence-base

The CSO coalition relied on available data collected by the Federal and State Ministries of Women's Affairs. The sex-disaggregated data highlighted the number of incidences of violence against women and girls, including domestic violence and sexual violence. The data was then translated into an accessible format: easy-to-read infographics. The aim was that the data would provide evidence, raise awareness about the issue, and make a case for specific measures to be included in the government's COVID-19 response plans.



We took the data that was being generated by the government and translated it into infographics for social media, so that citizens could understand the gravity of the situation,” said John Akiolu, Freedom Foundation. “Our aim was to close the information gap between citizens and the government with concrete data to support our advocacy efforts.” ”

Advocacy and engagement of different actors strengthened to address VAWG during COVID-19

CSOs worked to build strong advocacy and awareness about increased violence against women and girls during COVID-19. The messages were developed based on global guidance on how to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls.





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The outreach focused on the increasing numbers but also shared ways to control anger and stress, and encourage vigilance and reporting by friends, neighbours and family. The campaign aimed to increase the knowledge and awareness-support for community mobilisation. It stressed how people can support survivors, including through maintaining anonymity and confidentiality, appropriately engaging with the perpetrator, reporting to the services, and combating stigma.

The communications challenged gender stereotypes and harmful masculinities, accentuated under COVID-19 circumstances (e.g. increased household care work for women, financial insecurity), with targeted messages for men in order to encourage healthy ways of coping with stressful situations.

To amplify their efforts, CSOs engaged with media outlets to continue to raise the visibility of increased violence against women and girls, demonstrating how the risk factors that drive violence are exacerbated in the context of COVID-19. Information was provided, through public service announcements and radio discussion programmes, to survivors of domestic violence, for example, on referrals.

Services strengthened for women who experience violence during COVID-19

Civil society worked with authorities to treat services for women who experienced violence as essential services and adapted to the current pandemic context. Services, such as family support units and sexual assault referral centres, were strengthened through safety planning to adapt to the COVID-19 operations, to ensure survivors' had access to psychosocial support for women and girls who experienced violence, and adequate protection for frontline health and social support workers. Due to movement restrictions, CSOs had to 'think out of the box' to strengthen the response for survivors of sexual assault. Helplines, online counselling and technology-based solutions such as SMS, online tools, and social support networks were also developed to respond to the situation and help victims remotely.

LESSONS LEARNED

Collective action amplifies the voice of marginalised groups. As a coalition, CSOs had strength in numbers. The advocacy campaign had stronger impact and reach as a collective, than it would have if individual CSOs had implemented separate campaigns. Through the work of the coalition with ACT support, there was increased capacity across the CSOs to carry out advocacy, sensitization activities, and media engagement.

A collaborative approach between CSOs and government improved linkages among stakeholders in the identification and addressing of social issues, like VAWG. The coalition successfully 'worked with' government agencies rather than against to strengthen the response to VAWG amid COVID-19. Real-time tracking of the VAWG statistics raised awareness of the issue and provided CSOs with an evidence base for action. It also worked to improve the government accountability and responsiveness on the issue.

Flexible modes of support can offer more adaptability to relevant issues. The flexible terms of ACT support, enabled CSOs to pivot their responses to key issues in their communities. When VAWG cases were highlighted amongst CSOs as an area of serious concern in Kano and Lagos states, the CSO coalition approached ACT to divert funds to specifically address the issue.

Find out more

Agents for Citizen-driven Transformation (ACT)

ACT@ng.britishcouncil.org

www.justice-security.ng