

Surviving Covid-19: A Women-Led Response

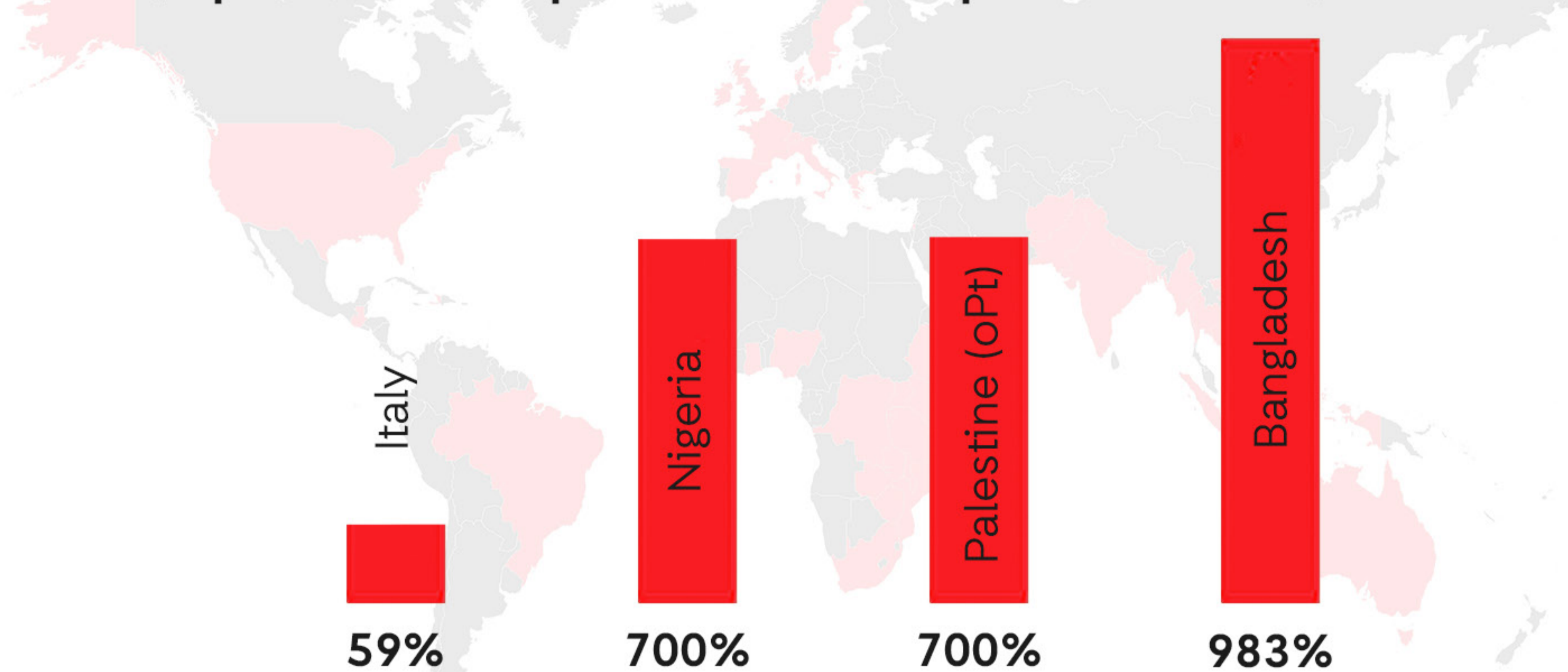


Summary

- ✓ Domestic violence has surged worldwide, yet services are being cut or closed.
- ✓ Courts are closed because of lock down, meaning legal cases are forced to settle out of court, which is increasing community tensions.
- ✓ Less than 0.3% of funding needed to protect women from violence has been committed.

The UN Chief, António Guterres, has called for a 'global ceasefire' amid the 'horrifying surge' of violence against women and girls during the coronavirus outbreak¹, a trend UN Women has called a 'shadow pandemic'. ActionAid is working with partners and women's movements which run shelters and hotlines for women to escape and overcome abuse. ActionAid staff and partners tracked domestic violence spikes across Europe, Africa, Asia, Middle East and Latin America. In Bangladesh, we found a tenfold increase in domestic violence cases compared to prior years before the pandemic². But ActionAid found the uptick in femicide, rape and violence to be a global phenomenon, played out across all regions with shocking regularity and predictability.

ActionAid and partners' management of domestic violence cases in March/April 2019 compared with same period in 2020, as a % increase:



Even before coronavirus, an average 137 women globally are killed intentionally by a member of their own family every day³. One in three women worldwide experience physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner or other perpetrator over their lifetime⁴. But during any emergency or protracted crisis, violence against women and girls increases. The coronavirus pandemic may be the most far-reaching humanitarian crisis in a generation, set to unleash the worst economic impact since the Great Recession of the 1930s⁵.

Evidence collected for this briefing tells us that women are bearing the brunt of this, as health workers, home schoolers, carers and those facing unemployment. With no social protection and huge gaps in public services, women are being caught in a cycle of entrapment. Women and girls' access to technology in many contexts is limited and the phone or internet is often controlled by male relatives, blocking options to seek support or escape.

Covid-19 response measures worldwide are headlined by 'stay at home' directives, but there are many women, girls and LGBTIQ+ people for whom home is not a safe place. Due to restrictions on movement, many LGBTIQ+ people are confined in hostile environments with unsupportive family members or co-habitants, making them vulnerable to homophobic and transphobic violence⁶ and often criminalized and unwelcome at some shelters and services. There is also increased risk of sexual exploitation and violence by state officials and armed forces⁷. These trends are felt globally but magnified in marginalised communities, where existing inequalities exacerbate the danger for women and girls.

References:

¹ UN chief calls for domestic violence 'ceasefire' amid 'horrifying global surge' [UN News](#) Farran (2020)

² The National Women's Violence and Prevention Forum works across 25 locations in Bangladesh.

³ In March/ April 2020 there were 1495 GBV cases compared with 138 cases in the same period in 2019 and increase of 983%.

⁴ [UN Women](#) Ending Violence Against Women

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ McKinsey 'Imperative of our time' March 2020

⁷ OHCHR (2020) 'COVID-19 and the Human Rights of LGBTI People'

⁸ DFID 'Violence against Women and Girls Helpdesk Report' March 2020

New Findings

New research by ActionAid, based on surveys of its partners and women's movements, comparing data from March/April 2020 to the same period in 2019, found:

- **In Bangladesh:** a tenfold increase in sexual and domestic violence
- **In Uganda:** shelters shut down even though caseloads doubled
- **In Nigeria:** 253 attacks documented since lockdown
- **In Gaza:** 700% increase in demand for counselling services
- **In Italy:** calls to a national anti-violence hotline up 59%
- **In Brazil:** 22% average increase in femicide across 12 states, with most women killed in Acre, a northern state with a shocking 300% spike

ActionAid has monitored service users and referrals to women's shelters and hotlines across seven countries in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East and compared data from March to May 2020, during lockdown, to comparable data from previous years. The new findings show that, **whilst domestic violence has surged worldwide, services across the globe are being cut or closed, leaving women trapped - or forced to return to - dangerous households.**

Many partners ActionAid works with receive no government funding and many shelters face lockdown restrictions. In April, ActionAid was forced to temporarily shut down ten of its shelters in Uganda due to lockdown, even though the caseloads doubled in March and April 2020 during the outbreak, compared to the prior year.⁸ It is crucial that shelters and support for women facing violence and abuse are classed as essential services during crises and epidemics, because this is precisely the time that women face greater risk to their lives.

The pandemic has diverted police resources and shut down criminal courts, preventing survivors from accessing justice, while the perpetrators of the crimes walk free. ActionAid's new survey of 15 women's shelter managers reveals domestic violence is skyrocketing in all regions of the world. Not only that, a second wave of injustice is being caused by out of court settlements or impunity, compounded by the shut down or under-funding of services for women and girls. From Nepal to Nigeria, ActionAid partners are dealing with **cases which are forced to settle out of court, due to lockdown, which is increasing community tensions and is deeply damaging for survivors' ability to rebuild their lives.**

ActionAid Nigeria has called on the Presidency to declare rape a crime without options of bail or out of court settlement, as the social justice organisation documented almost daily cases of Gender Based Violence (GBV)⁹ in Bauchi, Cross River, Enugu, Kebbi and Kwara States, totaling at least 253 cases since lock down began in March 2020.

ActionAid Ghana finds impunity to be a major contributing factor to the violence being perpetuated or repeated around the world.¹⁰ In Ghana, 71.5% of women have experienced violence in their lifetime and, despite a comprehensive Domestic Violence Act being passed in 2007, too many survivors are yet to access justice for crimes against them. In Ghana, ActionAid has called for a well-resourced and sustainable Domestic Violence Fund for survivors, to ensure free medical treatment, shelter provision and survivors' access to justice.

Yet the shadow pandemic of violence, rape and murder of women remains the most ignored and underfunded part of the UN's Global Humanitarian Response Plan for Covid-19. **Less than 0.3% of this funding needed to protect women from violence has been committed.**¹¹

ActionAid works with women's rights organizations, activists and violence survivors whose knowledge and expertise must be central to any decision-making around GBV prevention and response.

References:

⁸ActionAid's Shelter in Bwaise, Kampala dealt with 480 GBV cases in March/April 2019 and 955 in March/April 2020, an increase of 99%.

⁹Definition of Gender Based Violence can be found in the 1993 [UN General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women](#).

¹⁰ActionAid Ghana, 'Falling Through The Cracks' Report 2019

¹¹OCHA [Covid-19 Funding Summary](#) May 2020

Case Study:

The women Rickshaw drivers working out of ActionAid's 'Gauravi One-Stop Crisis Centre' in India.

The centre is a place where women and girls can access a range of services when they have survived sexual and/or domestic violence. It has now also become a one-stop shop for the coronavirus response in Bhopal – from opening a community kitchen, to delivering rations and sanitation kits to marginalised groups, to continuing its helpline for domestic violence survivors.

Gauravi is currently distributing 5000-7000 food packets a day to people in need, including sex workers, transgender communities, Muslim minorities, and homeless people. Female rickshaw drivers trained by the centre play a central role in distributing food – this includes 12 e-rickshaw drivers with environmentally-friendly electric vehicles. The women are trained so they can work and earn a living, but they are currently volunteering for the relief effort. Hunger has become an urgent issue in India, as coronavirus lockdowns prevent people from earning their daily wage.



Talat - ©Samyamo Debnath/ActionAid

Talat, a survivor of domestic violence, is one of the volunteers playing a vital role in ActionAid's emergency coronavirus response in Bhopal. After leaving an abusive marriage, Talat was supported by ActionAid and the Gauravi One-Stop Crisis Centre, where she received vocational training to be an auto-rickshaw driver. She's now using her rickshaw to deliver rations to women and families in need during India's coronavirus lockdown. Talat says she was inspired to join ActionAid and Gauravi's coronavirus response so that she could help others, just as she herself had been helped.

A global phenomenon:

Sleepwalking into the shadow pandemic of global femicide

Asia: Bangladesh

“Women and girls are trapped in a pressure cage”

ActionAid collaborates with the National Women’s Violence and Prevention Forum, formed with the Stop Violence Against Women Network (SVAW), which works across 25 districts in Bangladesh. The forum has documented a shocking tenfold increase in reports of gender based violence, including domestic violence and rape during the pandemic.¹² With no government funding for the networks and the level of violence increasing due to the lockdown, the service is worried that rising unemployment levels will continue to make women even more vulnerable to violence. The number of rape cases in April 2020 is four times higher than in April last year.¹³

The networks support women through group work and have raised concerns about lockdowns limiting their ability to protect women now and in the long term.

The networks saw a 345% increase in cases of physical violence against women.¹⁴ However, network representatives are worried that some cases are still not being reported due to lockdown tensions.

The shocking surge in violence is also affecting the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar. The camps have seen a 28% increase in reports of gender-based violence¹⁵ as women and girls are trapped in a ‘pressure cage’. A woman recently reported needing nine stitches after she had the soles of her feet slashed by her neighbour. The argument began over a fallen tile and it was a dispute that turned violent quickly due to the heightened pressures of lockdown.

In Cox’s Bazar, ActionAid’s seven ‘safe spaces’ have been allowed to stay open in order to continue vital support to women, many of whom are survivors of sexual violence in conflict. Aside from emergency food, water and sanitation, all other activities were suspended.



Sharmin - ©Fabeha Monir/ActionAid

Sharmin, case management officer in the camps says: *“Women and girls are trapped in a pressure cage. With men at home all day things are very tense. Small disagreements are turning into major assaults. Women and girls need counselling and the correct support services where they can become self-reliant. However, without government funding the women in the camps have an uncertain future trapped in violence.”*

References:

¹² The National Women’s Violence and Prevention Forum works across 25 locations in Bangladesh. In March/ April 2020 there were 1495 GBV cases compared with 138 cases in the same period in 2019 and increase of 983%.

¹³ National Women’s Violence and Prevention Forum: April 2020 saw an average of 19 reports of rape compared to an average of 5 rapes reported per month in 2019.

¹⁴ National Women’s Violence and Prevention Forum: On average 2019 saw 29 cases per month whilst in April 2020 alone there were an average 129 reported incidents of physical violence against women, an increase of 345%.

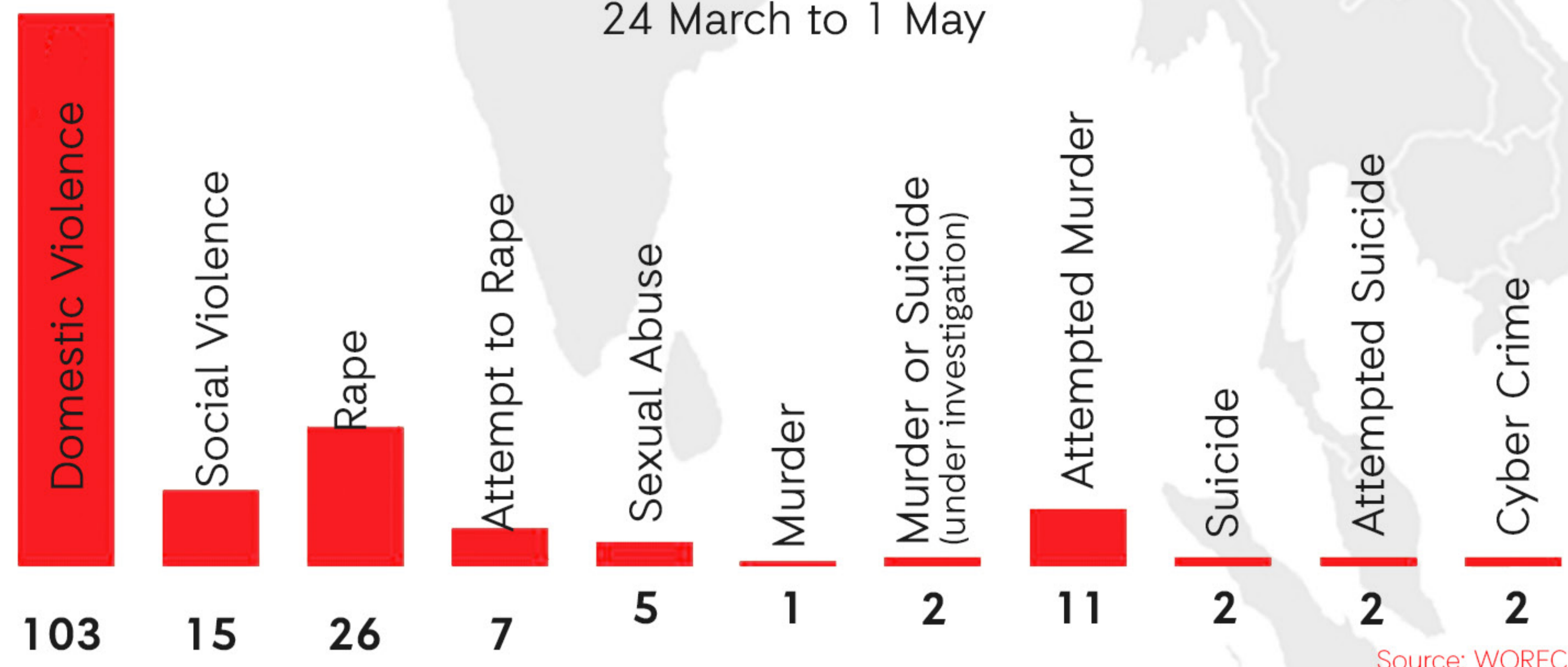
¹⁵ Kutupalong Ukhyia shelter in Cox’s Bazar: March /April 2019 cases 47; March /April 2020 cases: 60, and increase of 28%.

Asia: Nepal

“There are spikes in domestic violence, murder, rape, child marriage, polygamy and suicide”

In Nepal, the Women’s Rehabilitation Centre and Women Human Rights Defenders Network found 624 violence cases across 51 districts with two thirds of cases perpetrated by their own family members.

Domestic violence cases against women and children during the lockdown
24 March to 1 May



Source: WOREC

Nisha Lama Karki, Women’s Rights Coordinator at ActionAid Nepal, said:

“There are limited shelter places because of fear of infection. The government lacks sufficient testing kits, so many shelters deny access for women survivors. Besides, the Judicial Committees are not functioning at the moment to handle these cases. Even if crimes are reported, the police are requesting to settle and mediate the cases, and this creates fear, insecurity and distrust among the survivors. Due to lockdown the violence cases are suppressed, and survivors are not reporting. There is a huge gap in providing safety and access to justice. Because of this, the suicide rate has increased in women and girls.”



Anjana - ©Sabin Shrestha/ActionAid

ActionAid Nepal has established Gender Focal Person as a frontline support to women and girls to report crimes and access services and justice. ActionAid is building a chain of support in the community where women and young girls are connected via phone calls and social media to force the government to be accountable. The programme connects the local government, judicial committee and local leaders with survivors and campaigners who demand access to services and instant response to violent cases.

Africa: Nigeria

“Women are sexually violated or killed almost daily”

ActionAid Nigeria has called the escalation of violence ‘an emergency’ in itself, following the increase in reported cases of rape and killings of women and girls, particularly in May 2020. Since the lockdown in March 2020, ActionAid Nigeria and partners have documented 253 cases of GBV in Bauchi, Cross River, Enugu, Kebbi and Kwara States.

Country Director, Ene Obi said: *“Arrest is no longer enough to serve as deterrent as this is now almost a daily occurrence. Most of these cases are settled out of court so there is no real justice for the survivors and their families. We have never been more alarmed about the cases of gender-based violence in Nigeria than in recent times. Girls, women, young and old now live in fear as they are no longer safe even in their own homes.”*

In Nigeria, ActionAid is supporting seven shelters and our partner Attah Sisters Helping Hand Foundation (ASHHF) has seen caseloads almost triple during the pandemic. The team is dealing with a case of rape almost every day, with no government funding.

At the Irete Resource Centre, Lagos, 48 domestic violence cases were received in March/April, a 700% increase on the six cases in the same period in 2019. The number of service users has doubled compared to last year.

Bose Ironsi who works at Irete, said: *“As a survivor of child sexual abuse, I am passionate about supporting the most vulnerable individuals, especially women and girls, to overcome all forms of violence and harmful practices. Working at Irete Resource Centre provides a hands-on platform for me to contribute to effective prevention and response to sexual violence against women and girls.”*

The Cross River State Ministry of Women Affairs (MOWA) in Calabar, said: *“We initially shut down operations at the peak of the pandemic...But we had to resume work due to the incessant calls and the increased reports of violence in families. If intervention is not carried out fast, it is feared that a lot of these women could be disfigured or even lose their lives.”*

Africa: Kenya

“Adaption is key. We have to tailor services to meet emerging needs”

Rape and other forms of sexual violence cases increased exponentially in the first two weeks of the current nationwide curfew, constituting 35.8% of all reported crimes¹⁶. Yet programmes which prevent and protect women from violence have been suspended or slowed down due to restrictions on social gatherings and schools’ closure. ActionAid Kenya has adapted and communicates through an SMS platform which hosts 7000 members and partners with local radio programmes to reach out with messages of support and advice. The critical support and response to survivors of violence, such as medical, legal and psychosocial support, has not stopped. ActionAid’s Kenya team are also providing cash transfers to women who have lost their jobs overnight due to lockdown and are at risk of increased family stress, with no means to feed their children.

Agnes Kola, who leads the Women’s Rights programme in ActionAid Kenya said: *“Economic crisis response measures such as food distribution and cash transfers by the government and other actors should account for women’s unique situation by providing items that boost their health status and enable them use their decision making power on what to provide for their households.”*

References:

¹⁶ [Daily Nation](#)

Middle East: Palestine

"Femicide has plagued Palestinian society for decades but is becoming more pronounced."

In the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), ActionAid youth networks and women-led teams have adapted programmes to create online services, telephone hotlines and social distanced door-to-door support for women.

Wefaq Society, an ActionAid partner in the south of the Gaza strip, reports that the number of individual counselling and legal advice sessions it's given to women survivors of GBV have increased 700%.¹⁷ Due to lockdown restrictions, Wefaq's services are being provided online and ActionAid is using radio broadcasts to raise awareness about gender-based violence.

ActionAid Palestine has established an online platform for women's groups including workshops for managing family stresses and pressure. The team shares contact details for all emergency units and specialised institutions in each geographic location so women can request help any time. They provide advice to reduce domestic violence, coordinating with specialists and making referrals where necessary.



ActionAid Palestine Delivering to GBV Survivors - ©Rushdi Saraj/ActionAid

Eleven women have been reported killed since the beginning of 2020, six out of whom were murdered in coronavirus lockdown, according to Palestinian women's rights activist Shatha Shiekh Yousef, spokesperson of Talat, in Haifa.

In Gaza, the Women's Affairs Centre states that the presence of men and children inside the house has created a new wave of violence against women, including verbal, physical, psychological, and sexual violence. This has increased the fear, tension, grievance and psychological stresses on women, placing them under high risk as women are confined with their abusers.

SAWA, another Palestinian women's movement monitoring and reporting on GBV, managed to answer 82% of more than 78,000 calls made to the helpline during lockdown from March to May 2020.

References:

¹⁷ Individual counselling and legal advice sessions given in March/April 2020 is 320, up from 40 for the same period in 2019. This is an increase of 700%.

Latin America: Brazil

"Femicide has increased 300% in the north."

In Brazil, femicide was already on the rise by 7.3% in 2019 compared to the previous year. Now, domestic violence is deepening, as women in social isolation are confined with their aggressor. 143 women were killed across 12 states in March and April 2020, a 22% increase in femicide compared to last year, according to data collected by security agencies. According to the report, the state with most critical deterioration is Acre, Northern Brazil, where the increase was 300%.¹⁸ Women are more vulnerable during the health crisis, unable to reach police stations, hotlines or options to formalise complaints against aggressors and, therefore, to protect themselves. These figures are therefore widely considered to be under-reported.

Data from Rio and São Paulo cities shows an increase of about 50% of cases of domestic violence. Due to social distancing recommendations, women, girls, teenagers and infants are more exposed to the violence inside their own homes. ActionAid Brazil and partners are campaigning to prevent sexual abuse of children and adolescents by sharing reliable information on how to act and search for help in suspicious cases or proven cases. Many ActionAid Brazil partners are also distributing flyers with information about the Maria da Penha Law (which criminalizes domestic violence) and how to access women friendly police stations and women's shelters.

Nivete Azevedo runs Cabo Women's Centre in Pernambuco State in Brazil, which has been hit particularly hard by Covid-19. She said: *"In the coast of Pernambuco state where we work, Women's Reference House, is responsible for the first assistance in cases of domestic violence. But its operation was interrupted because 90% of the team ended up contracting Covid-19. We needed to suspend service for 15 days."*

In Rio Grande do Norte state services did not close. Services were functioning, but with reduced staff and shorter opening times. The Special Secretariat for Women's Policy held a public meeting with the Civil Police and carried out a joint action to publicize the social networks of the service so that women victims of domestic violence could use these online channels. A law was also created to sanction the creation of a virtual police station to better meet the growing needs of women, due to an increase in domestic violence in the state.

Glauce Arzua, ActionAid Brazil, said: *"ActionAid has been investing in strengthening women's autonomy and women-only spaces to meet, share their problems...provide emotional support, campaign against domestic violence and strengthen women's ability to get to create their own businesses. None of this is happening now because of the lockdown. And these women must not be left behind. Once again, they are locked in their homes having to take on every chore, not having a say or abused for having a say. That's the cycle of abuse."*

Europe: Italy

"The violence was always there, but the magnitude of danger is now worse"

A review by the Italian National Statistics Institute (ISTAT) found the number of women who asked for support through the government's anti-violence hotline increased by 59% during lockdown.¹⁹ ActionAid-funded anti-violence centre, 'Tellini Onlus', has seen an increase in requests for support since the coronavirus outbreak, but has responded to structural societal causes of violence against women for more than a decade. The centre has seen a 50% increase in repeat or return cases and the level of risk to these women has worsened. The centre offers an escape path for survivors, with job advice and grants to help women retrieve their autonomy.

Case study: Michaela* is 65 and her husband controls everything she does. For six months she's worked with the centre to plan an escape but its made more difficult with lockdown. She calls the centre when he goes out on errands. She's afraid any false move will unleash his violence. With the lockdown, she no longer goes out, even to shop, because he decides everything, including if she can eat or not. The centre is supporting her and recommending safe strategies to survive this period. (*name changed)

References:

¹⁸ Security Incident Reporting across Brazilian States report April 2020

¹⁹ Italian National Research Institute infographic April 16 2020 (provided on request).

A Global Response fit for a shadow pandemic

Before the pandemic, many governments failed to provide basic, free and essential services to address GBV – helplines, shelters, police and justice-sector responses and healthcare. In many countries, these services remain underfunded, understaffed and poorly coordinated.

The UN estimates that \$6.71 billion²⁰ is needed to support countries with their Covid-19 Humanitarian Response Plans (HRP)²¹ of which at least approximately \$45 million will be needed to combat global GBV during the pandemic.²² Yet, as of May 2020, there was no specific mention of GBV in either the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Policy Tracker, which summarises 193 countries' key economic and social responses to Covid-19,²³ nor in the World Bank and International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Social Protection and Job Responses to COVID-19.²⁴ Despite the widespread acknowledgement that GBV has increased across the globe during this pandemic, less than 0.3% of funding needed to protect women from violence has been committed.²⁵

Some countries are taking initial steps to tackle the rise in GBV or are targeting women with response packages:

- In Italy, instead of a survivor having to leave the house of an abuser, prosecutors have ruled that in situations of domestic violence the perpetrator must leave the family home.
- In Madrid, Spain, an instant messaging service with a geolocation function offers an online chat room that provides immediate psychological support to survivors of violence.
- In the Canary Islands, Spain, women can alert pharmacies about a domestic violence situation with a code message "Mask-19" that brings the police in to support.²⁶
- In Canadian Provinces, Quebec and Ontario, domestic violence shelters are deemed essential services and will remain open during the lockdown, as the Canadian aid package announced \$50 million to support shelters for those facing sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence.²⁷
- Bangladesh has included health and protection services in its humanitarian response plan (HRP) in acknowledgement that GBV will increase.
- In Brazil, women without a spouse who are eligible for the new governmental cash transfers in response to C-19, will receive a cash sum.
- Colombia is providing in-kind food vouchers to children and women 'at nutritional risk'.
- In India, women will receive Cash Transfers for three months. To be eligible women need a 'Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana' (a financial inclusion) account.
- The Syria Regional plan aims to maintain essential health care for refugees and other vulnerable groups, including mental health and psycho-social support for women and girls.²⁸

No magic bullet: The vast majority of governments are committed to reducing GBV, as a result of targeted campaigning from women's movements. South Africa announced a five-point plan for tackling the GBV crisis, before the pandemic. It includes prevention; strengthening the criminal justice system; enhancing the legal and policy framework; ensuring adequate care, support and healing for victims of violence; and strengthening the economic power of women. President Cyril Ramaphosa said upon launching the initiative: *"In implementing our prevention measures, we must recognise that violence against women is not a problem of women. It is a problem of men."*²⁹ More recently in June 2020, he called for the "culture of silence around gender-based violence to end", following several femicides, including one woman who was eight months pregnant and found stabbed and hanging from a tree. He noted the femicides had occurred since some coronavirus restrictions were lifted, including a ban on the sale of alcohol.³⁰

References:

²⁰ UN OCHA [Covid-19 funding summary](#)

²² *ibid*

²⁴ World bank and ILO Social Protection and Job Responses to COVID-19 ['real time review'](#) April 2020

²⁶ [UN Women](#) Ending Violence against Women and Girls

²⁸ [UN Humanitarian Response plan](#) p73

²¹ [UN OCHA](#)

²³ Important to note that the tracker focuses on discretionary actions and may not fully reflect the policies taken by countries in response.

²⁵ [UN OCHA appeal summary](#)

²⁷ *ibid*



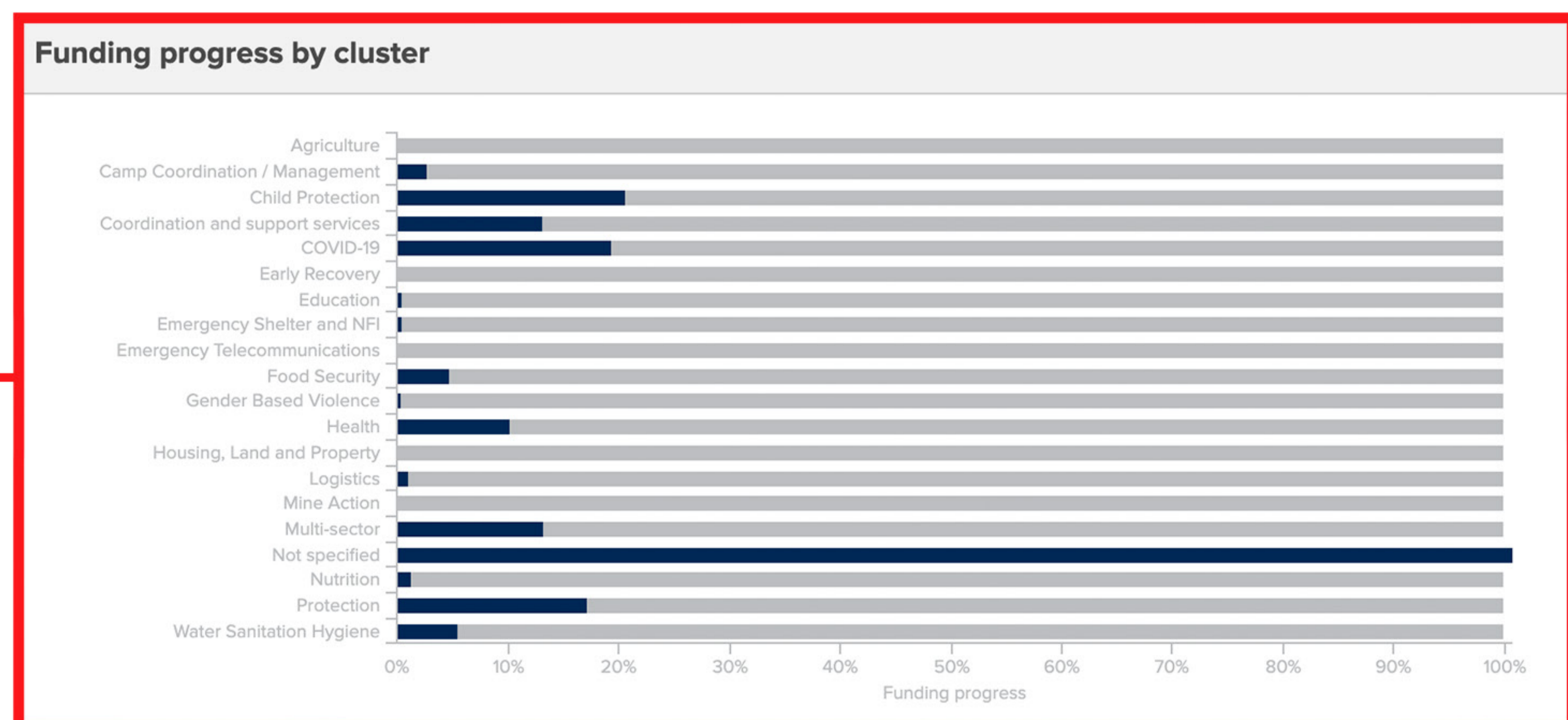
Women's decisions, leadership and response to the issue that affect them

ActionAid is calling for increased levels of funding to be channelled directly to local women's rights organisations and networks working at the frontline of crises and disasters. Four years ago, at the inaugural World Humanitarian Summit, major donors, UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) working in emergency response agreed that at least 25% of funding must go directly to local organisations, such as those running these women's shelters, as they know best how to support their communities. ActionAid took that promise seriously and more than 60% of its humanitarian funding goes to local organisations, the majority to women's organisations, such as those featured in this briefing. In contrast, as of May 6, a mere 0.1% of humanitarian funding from the UN-led Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) had been allocated to local organisations.³¹

Women, women's organisations and networks continue to be absent from crucial decision-making spaces for the Covid-19 response and in the social and economic recovery efforts from the pandemic³². While the average number of women in the global health and social care workforce is 70%, Care International found that women represented just 24% on average of national-level decision-making bodies for the pandemic are women.³³

The United Nations Global Humanitarian Response Plan speaks of the challenges for women and girls during the pandemic but does not mention women's agency or promote women's leadership. Local women's organisations, which are at the forefront at the fight against the spread of the virus are not receiving a fair share of funding. The current UN tracking system does not state how much funding is channelled to women-led and women's rights organisations. Moreover, the plan does not have a stand-alone specific objective on preventing and responding to gender-based violence. Without special attention and dedicated funding and expertise, gender, and other inequalities, will be exacerbated and women's rights risk being further eroded.

UN's Financial Tracking of Covid-19 Global Response shows that GBV is the most underfunded section of the Global Humanitarian Appeal (0.3% of funding goes to GBV).³⁴



References:

²⁹[News 24](#) 2019

³⁰[BBC](#) June 2020

³¹[Charter for Change](#)

³²OPERATION 50/50: ['Women's Perspectives Save Lives'](#)

³³[Care International](#) 2020

³⁴OCHA [Covid-19 funding summary](#)

Another grave concern regarding the Global HRP is that some UN Humanitarian donors, such as USAID, are lobbying for funding for sexual and reproductive health services to be removed from the plan entirely.³⁵ As noted in ActionAid's 'Creating Lasting Impact' policy briefing,³⁶ women have specific needs relating to their sexual and reproductive health, which are often deprioritised during epidemics. During the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone between 2013-2016, more women died from obstetric complications than of the disease itself.



Health Worker in Sierra Leone - ©Kate Holt/ActionAid

Equality for women and LGBTIQ+ people will be impossible without health services addressing women's specific needs (maternal, sexual and reproductive health services often provide HIV services as well as GBV response). Cutting these services will mean women will die. As it stands, 214 million women of reproductive age in developing countries who want to avoid pregnancy are not using a modern contraceptive method.³⁷ Safe pregnancy and childbirth depend on skilled health workers and quality emergency care. In the context of a health pandemic, these services are being interrupted by lockdown but they're also being deprioritised as funding, supplies and workers are deployed elsewhere to deal with the pandemic. In Kenya, a charity in Meru is concerned that the focus on maternal health is being set aside as resources are redirected towards the Covid-19 response, reporting that 11 expectant mothers have died during lockdown in the local area.³⁸ ActionAid's policy paper, *Creating Lasting Impact*, highlights how data collection around health emergencies is woefully inadequate as it is not even disaggregated to enable analysis of the impact on 'at-risk' groups, such as pregnant women and women with disabilities.³⁹ Research should be led by women, and track women's needs, so that programming is designed to address the intersectional impacts of the pandemic on women.



Nurse Margaret is a focal point for GBV survivors at her hospital - ©Esther Mbabazi/ActionAid

References:

- ³⁵USAID
- ³⁶ActionAid 2020 '[Creating Lasting Impact](#)'
- ³⁷WHO 2018 '[Family Planning/Contraception Key Facts](#)'
- ³⁸Devex 2020
- ³⁹ActionAid 2020 '[Creating Lasting Impact](#)'

ActionAid's unique humanitarian signature:

Women-led Leadership and Response to the issues that affect them

Evidence shows that engaging with local actors is critical for the success and sustainability of humanitarian work. Experiences of GBV prevention and response programming also demonstrate that the inclusion of local actors and women's rights organisations and networks is necessary to effectively address gender inequality and to shift cultural norms.

In relation to the Covid-19 response, local women, their organisations and networks can be a powerful force in infectious disease control. They know the best ways of communicating health messages to, and are trusted by, families and communities. This means that they can lead an effective and inclusive response to stopping the spread of disease, increasing adoption of healthy behaviours based on accessible information.

Sharmin in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh:

Sharmin is an ActionAid Case Management Officer in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. The 21-year-old has been working in the densely populated camps for three years. She supports refugee women and girls who fled mass violence in Myanmar in 2017. Now, Sharmin says gender-based violence has *"massively-increased"* as coronavirus lockdown conditions heighten tensions. Many men are at home and cannot work, causing food shortages and arguments. Although agencies are entering the camp to provide food, social distancing means the flow has slowed. Sharmin has helped a 20-year-old woman who needed nine stitches after neighbours slashed the soles of her feet in a disagreement about a cement slab. The woman told Sharmin it escalated because lockdown means men are at home and arguments become aggressive quickly.

Sharmin has also helped a man slashed with a knife by his brother-in-law because he brought food to his sister. The attacker felt insulted because his wife had sought help. Although agencies are entering the camp to provide food, social distancing means the flow has slowed. Sharmin goes into the camp to run AA's women-friendly space, an essential service that links women and girls to food and medical agencies and provides psychosocial counselling. She now teaches her clients about social distancing and gives out masks, gloves and hand sanitiser – while keeping three metres apart. Sharmin has also raised funds to feed families by asking ActionAid colleagues to donate a day of their salary.



ActionAid Bangladesh Response - ©ActionAid



Sharmin - ©Fabeha Monir/ActionAid

Global Policy Recommendations

- ✓ Urgently ensure the full funding needs outlined in the UN plan reaches local women's organisations and women's rights networks working on the frontline of crises and disasters.
- ✓ Ensure that local women's organisations, being most affected by the crisis, have the power to influence and participate in the the Covid-19 response planning.
- ✓ Increase funding to prevent violence against women and girls as a priority life-saving intervention at the onset of humanitarian response.
- ✓ Fund women-led research and analysis, so that data on women is disaggregated and their specific needs can be met.

To prevent and respond to GBV, governments should:

- ✓ Adopt a zero-tolerance policy on GBV and mobilize maximum resources and measures to prevent and respond to it, adhering to existing commitments. Its time to turn the theory into practice before more women's lives are lost.
- ✓ Urgently classify GBV services as essential services and ensure that they are prioritised by law enforcement, health and other responders. This includes universal, free hotlines and safe shelters, emergency medical response and clinical management (treatment of injuries, emergency contraception, post exposure prophylaxis and the treatment of STIs), mental health support, police services, and justice-sector support.
- ✓ Urgently expand social protection responses that sustain women's jobs and livelihoods, particularly those in the informal sector and agriculture. (Acknowledging that many women remain trapped in violent relationships because they have no economic resources).
- ✓ Increase funds for civil society organisations that run women-led, inclusive GBV prevention and response services; make sure judicial systems continue to prosecute abusers; set up emergency warning systems in pharmacies and groceries; and create safe ways for women to seek support, without alerting their abusers.
- ✓ Take specific measures in all GBV prevention and response policies, programmes and services to recognise and act on GBV against all marginalised women and LGBTQI+ people without discrimination.
- ✓ Ensure that GBV prevention and response policies and programmes centre the knowledge and experience built over decades by GBV experts in women-led service providers and specialist service providers supporting particularly marginalised groups, including displaced women and LGBTQI+ communities. These organisations must be meaningfully involved in all decision-making at all stages of any interventions as well as prioritised for funding and other resources.

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