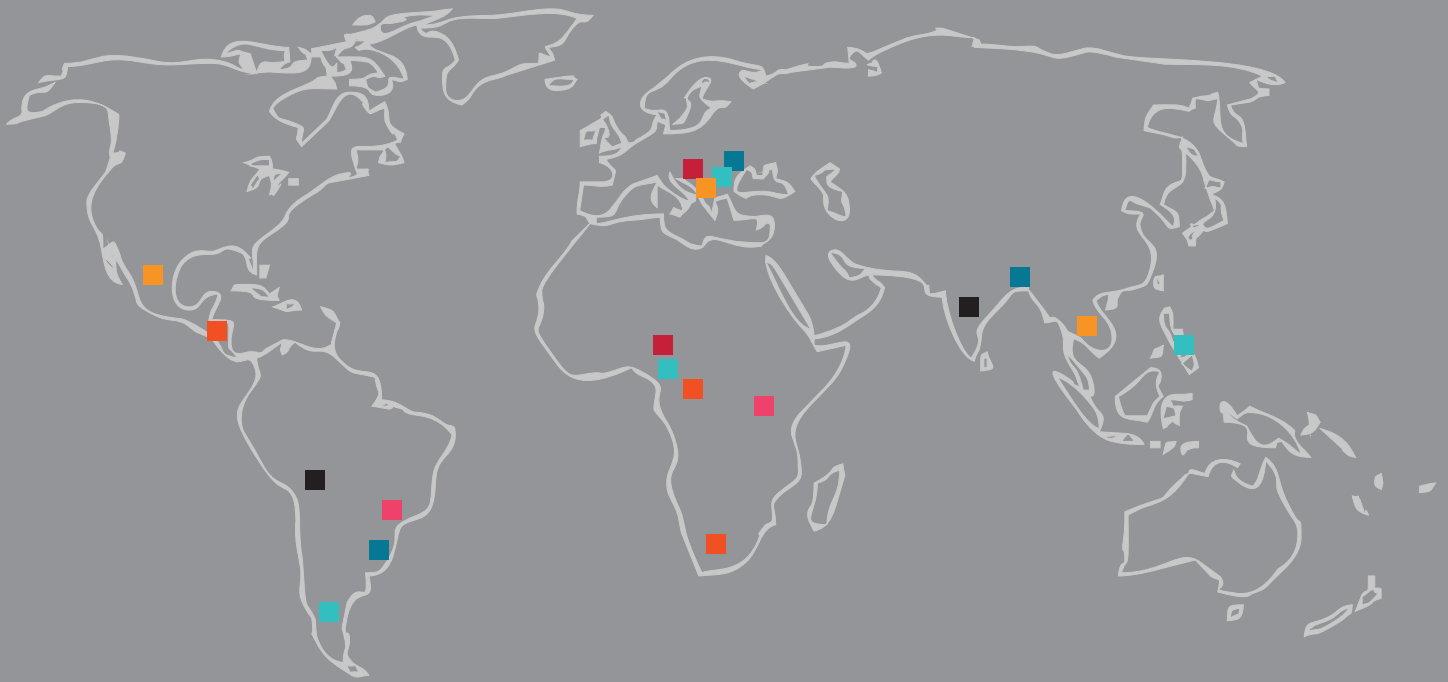


# GENDER JUSTICE

## DURING AND BEYOND THE COVID-19 CRISIS

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE  
AND THE ROLE OF LEGAL EMPOWERMENT GROUPS





- ESE . Association for emancipation, solidarity and equality of Women . North Macedonia
- BLAST . Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust . Bangladesh
- EQUIS Justicia para las Mujeres . México
- FIDA Cameroon
- FIDA Nigeria
- FIDA Uganda
- Fundación Construir . Bolívia
- Fundación Markani . Argentina
- Gender Alternatives Foundation . Bulgaria
- HRDC . Human Rights in Democracy Center . Albania
- Lawyers against Abuse . South Africa
- Foundation of Local Democracy . Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Geledés - Instituto da Mulher Negra . Brazil
- My Choices Foundation . India
- SALIGAN . PHILIPPINES
- THEMIS . Gênero, Justiça e Direitos Humanos . Brazil
- This Life Cambodia . Cambodia
- Iniciativa de los Derechos de la Mujer . Guatemala
- Women Safe House . Nigeria

# CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	4
LIST OF ACRONYMS	6
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	7
COVID-19: A JUSTICE CRISIS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS	8
Legal Empowerment: An Essential Approach	12
Legal Empowerment and Gender-based Violence	13
II. ABOUT THE PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH	15
Purpose	16
Participants	16
Methodology	17
III. THE INSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL LANDSCAPE	20
Pre-pandemic context	21
Gender-based Violence during the Pandemic	22
Institutional Responses	23
IV. THE ROLE OF LEGAL EMPOWERMENT GROUPS	28
Major challenges	29
Immobility and the Digital Divide	29
Sustainability and Funding	31
Community Paralegals and Community-driven Approaches	32
Adaptations & Innovations	36
Raising Awareness	38
Supporting Women in Situations of Violence	41
Strengthening Internal Operations	46
Relationship with Government	48
Collaboration	48
Complementarity	52
Capacity Building	53
Accountability	54
Advocacy	56
V. LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	58
Recommendations for the COVID-19 Crisis	59
Beyond the Pandemic: General Recommendations	62
CONCLUSION	65
ANNEX I	66

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This publication is the result of a participatory research initiative organized jointly by The Legal Empowerment Network, convened by Namati, and Themis - Gender, Justice and Human Rights (Brazil). The research was co-led and implemented by lead members of the network: the Association for Emancipation, Solidarity and Equality of Women - ESE (North Macedonia), the Uganda Association of Women Lawyers - FIDA (Uganda), and the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST).

Over a period of 5 months, from November 2020 to March 2021, a group of women activists and researchers dedicated time, energy and passion to gather information and prepare this report on gender justice and legal empowerment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The team at Themis was composed of the scholars Andrea Fachel, Deisi Conteratto, Izabel Belloc, Maíra Vale, and Simone Schuck da Silva, who helped design the methodology, carried out interviews and prepared the regional reports. Without this engaged team, it would not have been possible to cover 4 world regions and 15 countries in such limited time.

Substantive framing and coordination of this research were provided by Namati staff - Luciana Bercovich, Marta Almela, and Abigail Moy - and by Themis - Gender, Justice and Human Rights staff - Denise Dora, Marcia Soares, Leticia Balester, and Jade Alves - with the invaluable co-leading of Jasminka Friscik and Stojan Misev from ESE, Linette du Toit Lubuulwa and Irene Ekonga from FIDA Uganda, and Sara Hossain and Madhuri Kibria from BLAST. The final report was drafted by Denise Dora and Jade Alves, with the support of Simone Schuck da Silva from Themis and Abigail Moy, Luciana Bercovich, Marta Almela, and Taylor Raymond from Namati.

We want to express our deepest gratitude to all the women who have participated in this collective process. This research was carried out in a very difficult context. Many of the research leads and participants were infected with COVID-19 during the compressed research period, or compelled to take up unanticipated work to cover for afflicted colleagues. All have worked under high stress and emotional pressure resulting from relatives and colleagues falling sick, increased work and demands on their time due to the pandemic, and the deepening of violence against women. Brave women like these can and will change the world.

This report has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies. Themis also thanks the Ford Foundation Brazil for its support.

The contents of this publication may be freely used, adapted, and copied for educational and other noncommercial purposes, provided that any such reproduction is accompanied by due acknowledgement of the authors of this publication. © Namati, 2021

<b>ASHA</b>	Accredited Social Health Activist
<b>BLAST</b>	Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust . Bangladesh
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
<b>CLV</b>	Community Legal Volunteers . FIDA Uganda
<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus Disease 2019
<b>DV</b>	Domestic Violence
<b>ESE</b>	Association for Emancipation, Solidarity, and Equality of Women . Macedonia
<b>FLD</b>	Foundation of Local Democracy . Bosnia and Herzegovina
<b>FIDA</b>	Federación Internacional De Abogadas . Cameroon, Nigeria, Uganda
<b>GAF</b>	Gender Alternatives Foundation . Bulgaria
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-based Violence
<b>HRDC</b>	Human Rights in Democracy Center . Albania
<b>IPV</b>	Intimate Partner Violence
<b>LvA</b>	Lawyers against Abuse . South Africa
<b>MCF</b>	My Choices Foundation . India
<b>NAPTIP</b>	National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons . Nigeria
<b>NGO</b>	Non Governmental Organization
<b>PLP</b>	Popular Legal Promoters or “Promotores Legales Populares”
<b>SADC</b>	Southern African Development Community
<b>SALIGAN</b>	Sentro ng Alternatibong Lingap Panligal . Philippines
<b>SGBV</b>	Sexual and Gender-based Violence
<b>TLC</b>	This Life Cambodia
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Program
<b>VAPP</b>	Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act, 2015 . Nigeria
<b>VAW</b>	Violence Against Women
<b>WJI</b>	Women’s Justice Initiative . Guatemala
<b>WSHSI</b>	Women Safe House Sustenance Initiative . Nigeria

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The measures taken to contain the COVID-19 pandemic led to a surge in gender-based violence around the world. As governments moved to limit, suspend, or digitize vital victim support services, civil society organizations - and in particular grassroots legal empowerment groups - found new ways of helping women to seek safety and justice.

This report examines institutional and civil society responses to gender-based violence (GBV) during the pandemic, in particular domestic violence (DV) and intimate partner violence (IPV). It investigates the role of legal empowerment groups in filling justice gaps, reducing violence, improving service provision, and demanding accountability.

The research was a joint effort of members of the Legal Empowerment Network from Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia. Together, 19 grassroots justice organizations documented and analyzed the experiences of legal empowerment actors working on the frontlines to address GBV under the shadow of COVID-19. The report primarily draws from qualitative research and analysis from a combination of surveys, interviews, regional and global focus group discussions, case studies, and secondary research.

After reviewing the state of GBV before and during the early stages of the pandemic, the report describes how precautionary measures taken by governments affected the ability of women to seek recourse for violence. The report discusses additional constraints - like the digital divide and funding shortages - that shaped the manner in which civil society could respond. It then explores how community paralegals and other community-driven approaches enabled legal empowerment groups to surmount these challenges.

A description of the adaptations and innovations of grassroots groups, spurred by technological experimentation, follows. The report moves on to examine the nature of legal empowerment groups' engagement with the state: a delicate balance between aiding and collaborating with governments, and exposing state violations or demanding reform. Finally, lessons and insights from the experiences of grassroots legal empowerment groups are distilled into a set of recommendations for future action, both in crisis settings and beyond.

Among others, key recommendations include:

- Designate access to justice and gender-based violence services as “essential.”
- Authorize civil society groups serving GBV victims to continue working during lockdown periods.
- Prepare state actors for crisis by proactively establishing protocols to guide emergency actions impacting marginalized groups.
- Encourage collaborative relations between civil society and government, especially among community-level justice actors.
- Support and expand the work of grassroots actors such as community paralegals.
- Provide flexible, rapid, and sustainable funding for legal empowerment organizations.

# COVID-19: A JUSTICE CRISIS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS



photo My Choices Foundation



As of March 2021, the world has recorded over 123 million cases of COVID-19, resulting in 2.7 million deaths.<sup>1</sup> The pandemic has altered lives, the global economy, and the political landscape in many countries. Communities around the world continue to reel from the pandemic and measures taken to contain it.

In a multitude of ways, women and girls have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Women make up the majority of workers in the informal sector, and as such are more likely to be overlooked by government protections seeking to address pandemic-induced economic shocks in the formal sector.<sup>2</sup> Even when formally employed, women are over-represented in sectors that are among the hardest hit by COVID-19, often because they require face-to-face contact. Women are therefore more likely than men to lose their livelihoods during the global health crisis, while facing higher rates of COVID-19 transmission.<sup>3</sup>

The consequences extend beyond the economic sphere. As schools close and family members fall ill, women and girls assume the excessive burden of caretaking responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> Families struggling with finances are increasingly pushing their daughters toward early or child marriage.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the shift in medical resources towards pandemic response has diminished access to vital sexual and reproductive health services.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>UN Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Analysis, 'How COVID-19 is changing the world: a statistical perspective (Volume III)', UN Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Analysis, 29 March 2021, <https://bit.ly/3objEdd>.

<sup>2</sup>UN Women, 'COVID-19 and its economic toll on women: The story behind the numbers', UN Women, 16 September 2020, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/9/feature-covid-19-economic-impacts-on-women>.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Usha Ranji, Brittni Frederiksen, Alina Salganlcoff & Michelle Long, 'Women, Work, and Family During COVID-19: Findings from the KFF Women's Health Survey', Kaiser Family Foundation, 22 March 2021, <https://bit.ly/3hmPB0E>.

<sup>5</sup>UN Women, 'Impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and girls service provision: UN Women Rapid assessment and finding', 2020, p. 3, <https://bit.ly/3uWJy6M>.

<sup>6</sup>UN, 'Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women', 9 April 2020, p. 10, <https://bit.ly/3hp14g3>.



Among these negative impacts, the surge in gender-based violence (GBV) during the pandemic stands out as an urgent threat to the safety and wellbeing of women and girls. According to UN Women, “[s]ince the outbreak of COVID-19, emerging data and reports from those on the frontlines, have shown that all types of violence against women and girls, particularly domestic violence, has intensified”.<sup>7</sup> In certain countries, measures aimed at slowing the spread of COVID-19 have led to a 40% increase in reports of domestic violence.<sup>8</sup> In others, calls to GBV helplines have increased five-fold.<sup>9</sup> Several factors have contributed to this disturbing phenomenon. Restricted movement and social isolation measures, for instance, have the effect of trapping women with their abusers.<sup>10</sup> Women report that the stress of prolonged isolation and economic hardship has led to more frequent and intense bouts of violence from domestic abusers.<sup>11</sup> The consequences of this toxic mix can be fatal; femicide rates have been increasing throughout the pandemic in countries across the world.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup>UN Women, ‘The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19’, Gender equality matters in COVID-19 response, <https://bit.ly/3w2IWwD>.


<sup>8</sup>United Nations Human Rights Council, ‘The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic: impact and challenges for independent justice’, A/HRC/47/35, 9 April 2021, para. 39, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3924826?ln=en>.

<sup>9</sup>In still others, the absence of data prevents useful analysis of the pandemic’s impact on GBV. UN Women, ‘Facts and Figures: Ending Violence against Women’, March 2021, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>.

<sup>10</sup>UNDP, ‘UNDP Brief. Gender-based Violence and COVID-19’, 2020, p. 1, <https://bit.ly/3uOjqv8>. This situation affects particularly poor women who in many cases have no recourse and are also affected by the economic effects of the pandemic.

<sup>11</sup>‘Impact of COVID-19 on violence’, *supra* note 5.

<sup>12</sup>Weil, Shalva, ‘Two Global Pandemics: Femicide and COVID-19’, *Trauma and Memory*, 2020, Volume 8, no. 2, pp. 110-112, <https://bit.ly/2RQREzc>.



In a recent report, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers noted with grave concern the significant increase in GBV caused by confinement. He urged, that “[j]ustice systems must address these situations through effective actions and measures that make it possible to respond to the needs of victims.”<sup>13</sup> Despite the soaring need for emergency victim support, including judicial remedies such as protection orders, many governments closed courts and shuttered services early on in the pandemic. Some sought to limit services or prioritize urgent GBV cases only, while others attempted to manage the surge in cases by transitioning to digital systems.<sup>14</sup> This report highlights that, in many countries, these efforts were not sufficient to meet the needs of women in abusive situations.<sup>15</sup>

Fortunately, civil society in some contexts was able to fill in gaps, collaborate with government to find new ways of supporting women in situations of violence, and advance urgent structural and policy reforms. This phenomenon is part of a larger trend. Civil society, and in particular grassroots groups using legal empowerment approaches to help vulnerable communities realize their rights, pivoted in resourceful ways to address evolving justice needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The practices that emerged can be instructive for future policies and crisis responses.

<sup>13</sup>The coronavirus disease (COVID-19), supra note 8.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>For the purposes of this report, we will use the terms “women or girls in situations of violence”, “women or girls in abusive situations”, “survivors”, and “victims” interchangeably to refer to women and girls who have faced, are facing or have overcome situations of violence. This report acknowledges women and girls in situations of violence as agents of change.

## A. LEGAL EMPOWERMENT: AN ESSENTIAL APPROACH

The justice challenges arising from the pandemic are complex and interrelated. Some can be resolved as cases before traditional justice institutions – including courts and police – but many require engagement with a broader range of legal, social, administrative, and political processes. Recognizing this, grassroots groups are working directly with communities impacted by the pandemic to understand, use, and shape the law in creative and holistic ways – a process known as legal empowerment.<sup>16</sup>

Legal empowerment groups demystify laws and policies for the communities they serve, pragmatically blending legal action with advocacy, negotiation, and community organizing to reach a solution. In response to COVID-19, they are increasing access to vital information, aid, healthcare, and other basic services by enabling people to know their rights and navigate complex systems. Through the monitoring of service providers, law-enforcement agencies, and security forces, they enhance the accountability of pandemic response programs, while addressing violence during the enforcement of quarantines, curfews, and other containment measures. As emergency actions escalate, these groups work to prevent the entrenchment of unjust or discriminatory policies. These contributions are essential to immediate response efforts. They are also key to building stronger, fairer systems and economies during the recovery phase.<sup>17</sup>

### COMMUNITY PARALEGALS AND LEGAL EMPOWERMENT

Community paralegals mostly hail from civil society. They undertake the work of legal empowerment: helping vulnerable people to know, use, and shape the law so that they can exercise their rights. They are the ones on the front lines, collaborating with communities to resolve and prevent justice problems. Community paralegals go by many names: in this report they are referred to as community legal volunteers, popular legal promoters, peacemakers, community defenders, community advocates, and more. Whatever their title, community paralegals are knowledgeable in law and policy. Many are skilled in negotiation, organizing, and advocacy. They engage formal and customary institutions alike. Ultimately, their goal is to help people overcome injustice.

<sup>16</sup> Justice For All Campaign and Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, 'Grassroots Justice in a Pandemic: Ensuring a Just Response and Recovery', April 2020, <https://namati.org/resources/grassroots-justice-pandemic-ensuring-just-response-recovery/>; David Steven, Maaïke de Langen, Sam Muller & Mark Weston, et. al., 'Justice in a Pandemic - Briefing One: Justice for All And The Public Health Emergency', Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just, and Inclusive Societies, April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2QhIbBW>.

<sup>17</sup>'Grassroots Justice in a Pandemic', supra note 16.

## B. LEGAL EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE


In many countries, there exists a long tradition of legal empowerment groups serving women and girls in situations of violence. Grassroots organizations, including women's organizations responding to GBV, often host robust networks of community paralegals or use other community-driven strategies to provide counseling, training, and legal services. These are offered not just to victims, but also to the larger community, in an effort to normalize respect for women's rights and the enforcement of laws. By supporting women in their native languages and within hard-to-reach communities, legal empowerment groups are able to build trust with people who are often beyond the reach of public institutions.

While legal empowerment methods addressing GBV may vary, activities generally fall into three main categories: prevention, protection through legal and other support services, and advocacy.

Prevention programs aim to break the cycle of violence in communities. Activities may involve training programs for police and first responders, to ensure that they follow proper protocols in accordance with the law, or to educate them on the social, psychological, and physical dimensions of gender-based violence. Grassroots justice groups may engage with adolescent girls and boys, and the broader community in general, to educate them on rights and responsibilities.

Legal assistance and other support services are offered to women and girls in situations of violence. Community paralegals help to educate women on their rights and their options within the legal system, often accompanying them to police stations, courtrooms, or other legal proceedings. In addition to providing legal services, many organizations also run shelters, crisis centers, and hotlines. Most are embedded in extensive survivor support networks through which they can make rapid referrals for medical, social, and psychological services.

Advocacy efforts concentrate on improving laws, policies, or practices relating to the treatment and safety of women experiencing violence, as well as the prosecution of abusers. Where poor implementation arises out of ignorance of the law, advocacy is often blended with the capacity-building of duty bearers. Legal empowerment groups engage authorities at each step of a woman's experience with violence, including police, healthcare providers, the judiciary, policymakers, and more.



A defining characteristic of many legal empowerment programs is a focus on the transformation of women from victims of violence to agents of change. In many organizations, most if not all community paralegals are former beneficiaries, who wish to help others who were once in their position. This approach is in keeping with a philosophy that distinguishes legal empowerment groups from traditional legal aid providers. Rather than define success in terms of legal victory, legal empowerment organizations pay more attention to how empowered a woman has become to understand her options, assume control over her situation, and help others to do the same. The latter can be achieved in many ways, for example by informally advising an acquaintance, becoming a community paralegal, or engaging in collective advocacy around matters relating to GBV.

Legal empowerment shows results for its beneficiaries. Studies have documented positive impacts of legal empowerment efforts on the reduction of gender-based violence.<sup>18</sup> These methods and approaches proved to be invaluable during the pandemic, as grassroots justice groups raced to adjust to a rapidly changing social and institutional landscape.

<sup>18</sup>See, e.g., World Bank, 'Impact of Legal Aid: Ecuador', World Bank, February 2003, p. 11, <https://bit.ly/3uKMweM>. (Female legal aid clients are 17% less likely to experience physical violence after separation from their partners than non-legal aid clients); Pradip Panday & Golam Rabbani, 'Do legal empowerment activities of NGOs reduce gender-based violence in Bangladesh?', *International Journal of Gender Studies in Developing Societies*, vol.2(1), 2017, <https://bit.ly/3elUcbN>.

# ABOUT THE PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH



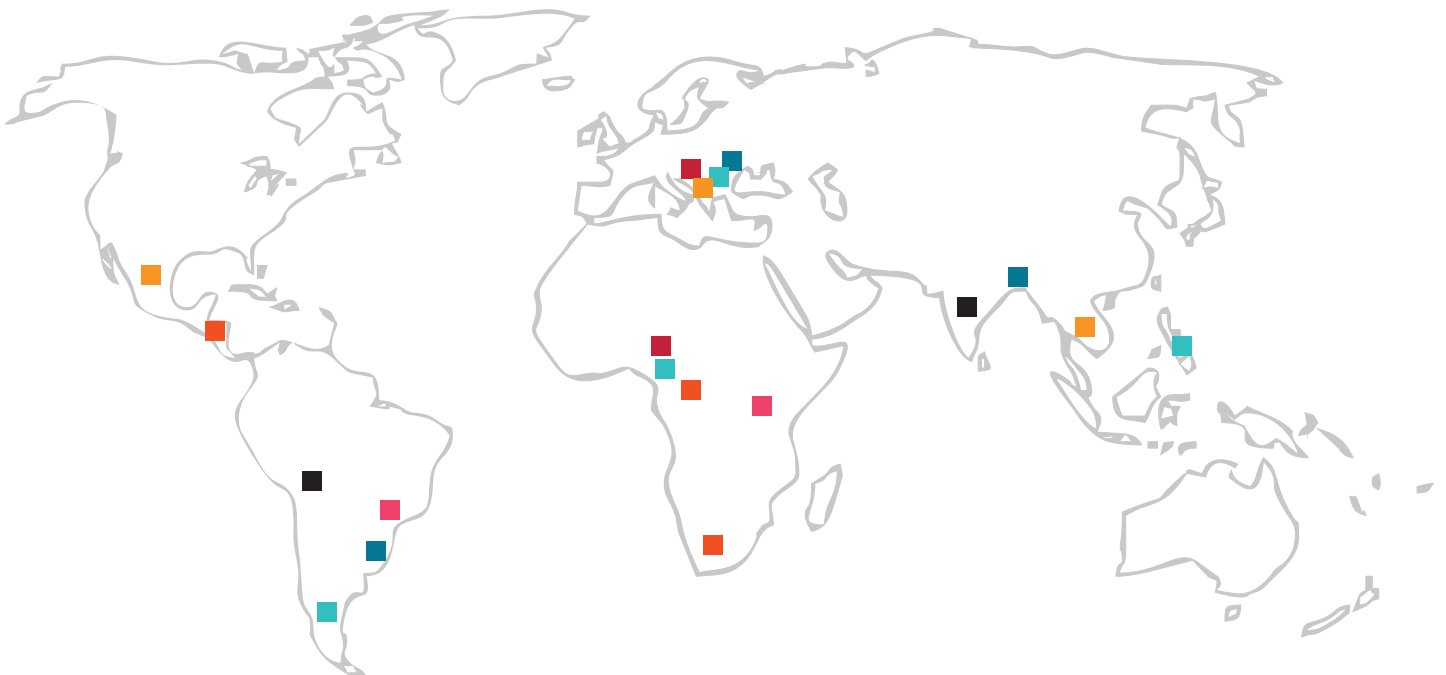
photo FOSM

## A. PURPOSE

The aim of this report is to examine institutional responses to GBV, especially domestic violence (DV) and intimate partner violence (IPV), during the pandemic, as well as the role of legal empowerment groups in filling justice gaps, reducing violence, improving service provision, and demanding accountability. In doing so, this research offers stakeholders insights on how civil society organizations can advance the physical and economic security of women and girls in emergency or crisis settings. As the primary point of reference, this research draws from the concrete experiences of frontline organizations using legal empowerment strategies to address GBV.

## B. PARTICIPANTS

The project is a joint effort of members of the Legal Empowerment Network from four regions: Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia. Together, 19 grassroots justice organizations mapped, discussed, analyzed, and documented the experiences of legal empowerment actors working on the frontlines to address GBV under the shadow of COVID-19 (more information on research participants can be found in Annex I).







Several research participants deploy community paralegals or their equivalents, including Sentro ng Alternatibong Lingap Panligal (SALIGAN) in Philippines, Themis and Geledés in Brazil, Fundación Construir in Bolivia, Women’s Justice Initiative (WJI) in Guatemala, My Choices Foundation (MCF) in India, FIDA Uganda, FIDA Nigeria and FIDA Cameroon, among others. The research participants who do not work directly with community paralegals otherwise apply a legal empowerment approach to their interventions. For example, they work closely with communities, provide legal aid with an empowerment orientation, or engage in participatory litigation or community-led advocacy. Such research participants include Equis in Mexico, Lawyers against Abuse in South Africa, Women Safe House Sustenance Initiative (WSHSI) in Nigeria, Human Rights in Democracy Center (HRDC) in Albania, and Foundation of Local Democracy (FLD) in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The transnational nature of this collaborative research effort offered participants a window into comparative experiences. It also highlighted the resilience and power of women’s and human rights groups across a variety of contexts. Despite undergoing serious challenges, the engagement of research participants revealed genuine dedication to, and curiosity for, innovating strategies to achieve positive results.

## C. METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a participatory approach across all the stages. Participants defined collective research questions, designed the structure of the research project, documented practices, compared and reflected on experiences, and synthesized comparative learning across contexts. The participatory methodology aimed to not only produce useful data and insights, but also enrich participants by facilitating peer learning and community-building. Research participants sought to produce real-time findings reflective of lived experiences, so that their learning could respond to the needs of both their organizations and the women they served.

Over the course of the 4 months, research participants took part in the initiative in the following ways:

S T A G E

1

### Research coordination

Namati and Themis established contact with regional leads, organized meetings, and proposed initial options for research design.

S T A G E

2

### Regional coordination

Regional leads were established and convened to define research questions, primary research methodology, and timeline.

Regional leads included:

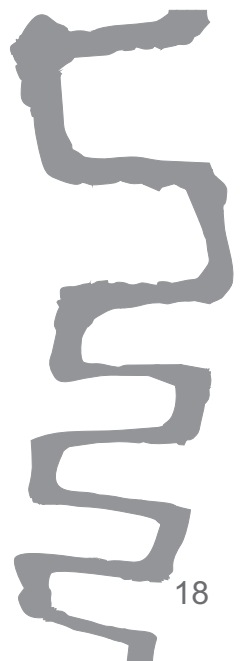
- Latin America: Themis - Gênero, Justiça e Direitos Humanos
- Sub-Saharan Africa: FIDA-Uganda
- Eastern Europe: Association for Emancipation, Solidarity and Equality of Women (ESE), North Macedonia
- South Asia: Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST)

S T A G E

3

### Regional cohorts

Each regional lead invited 3-5 organizations in their respective region to participate in the research (see Annex 1). Within these groups, regional leads sought diverse representation of methods, scale, and relations with the state.



The project predominantly focused on qualitative research, drawing from interviews with all the participants, regional and global focus group discussions, and case studies. It also incorporated data from surveys, research participants, and secondary research. Primary research activities included:

a

**Short questionnaires:** A questionnaire, with 14 questions about national and regional context, legislation and policies on GBV and in particular DV, and civil society methods for responding and adapting to the COVID-19 crisis, was administered to all research participants.

b

**Semi-structured interviews:** Each research participant partook in a 1-hour interview to offer more context or analysis to points of interest in their survey.

c

**Practitioner focus groups:** Regional and global focus group discussions were held with research participants, discussing their main challenges and adaptations.

d

**Case studies:** Regional leads invited 2-4 organizations per region to write an in-depth case study focusing on one or more aspects of their experience during the pandemic, focusing on concrete strategies for adaptation or innovation.

e

**Secondary research:** Themis and regional leads conducted secondary research to complement their primary sources. Materials reviewed include institutional information from domestic sources; reports from multilateral institutions, civil society, UN and regional bodies; news media; academic papers, and more.

After all the information was collected, Themis' research team, together with the project's regional leads, developed four regional reports highlighting comparative findings and lessons. This report aggregates and analyzes the regional reports, alongside the above inputs. Most of the information included in this report comes from the aforementioned primary sources; we have cited external secondary sources when this is not the case.



3

# THE INSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL LANDSCAPE



photo Fundación Construir

*“Confinement has left [women] without adequate support services for prevention, protection, assistance, and prosecution of violence. Likewise, the protocols addressing the causes of gender-based violence remain weak.”*

**Moira Vargas** - Fundación Construir, Bolivia

## A. PRE-PANDEMIC CONTEXT

All 17 states analyzed in this study have made commitments to uphold international agreements and regional conventions pertaining to gender-based violence. These include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW),<sup>19</sup> the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Convention of Belém do Pará,<sup>20</sup> the Istanbul Convention,<sup>21</sup> and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol).<sup>22</sup> In accordance with these protocols, governments have taken action at the national level to advance the right of women to a life without violence. In Bangladesh and Cambodia, for instance, protections for women and children have been codified in their constitutions.<sup>23</sup> Protections for GBV victims are also addressed by legislation, as in South Africa’s progressive Domestic Violence Act, which recognizes a range of forms of domestic violence and observes a broad definition of ‘domestic relationship.’<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup>United Nations General Assembly, ‘Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women’, Resolution 34/180, 18 December 1979, <https://bit.ly/3fj91Rk>.

<sup>20</sup>Persadie, Natalie, ‘A critical analysis of the efficacy of law as a tool to achieve gender equality’, University Press of America, 2012, p. 199.

<sup>21</sup>Council of Europe, ‘The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention): Questions and Answers’, p. 3, <https://rm.coe.int/istanbul-convention-questions-and-answers/16808f0b80>.

<sup>22</sup>African Union, ‘Protocol to the African Charter on Human Rights and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa’, Ordinary Session of the Assembly, 11 July 2003, <https://au.int/en/treaties/protocol-african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights-rights-women-africa>.

<sup>23</sup>The Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, Article XXVIII (1), (2), (4); Constitution of Cambodia, Article XLV and Article XLIV.

<sup>24</sup>Domestic Violence Act 178’, 1998, Section 1 Definition.

In spite of strong normative frameworks and national legislation, the prevalence of GBV remained a cause for concern, even before the onset of the global health crisis. In South Africa, for example, 26% of ever-partnered women aged 18 years or older had experienced physical, emotional, or sexual violence committed by a partner in their lifetime.<sup>25</sup> In Bolivia, it was estimated that at least 75% of women suffered or had suffered violence in the course of their lives. In rural areas, this rate increased to 85%.<sup>26</sup>

Civil society is integral to the ecosystem of support for women in situations of violence. Among other things, civil society organizations manage crisis centers, helplines, shelters, and a range of counseling services. In some contexts - for example, where states have not allocated adequate resources or do not have the capacity to reach remote areas - civil society actors are the primary service provider for GBV response.<sup>27</sup> But even when taken together with state services, support for women in situations of violence is often inadequate to meet demand.<sup>28</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic worsened this situation in the 17 states examined in this study.

## B. GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE DURING THE PANDEMIC

At the outset of the pandemic, government, civil society, and media documented soaring rates of GBV, attracting widespread attention.<sup>29</sup> In April 2020, the UN Secretary General urged the international community to work to end the “shadow pandemic” of gender-based violence.<sup>30</sup> In line with these findings, research participants observed an influx of GBV cases at the outset of the pandemic. In several states, official statistics reflected this increase. In Argentina, for example, 23% more cases of violence were recorded by the

<sup>25</sup>National Department of Health - NDoH, Statistics South Africa - Stats SA, South African Medical Research Council - SAMRC, & ICF, 'South Africa Demographic and Health Survey 2016', Pretoria, South Africa, and Rockville, Maryland, USA, 2019, <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR337/FR337.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup>National Statistics Institute and Ministry of Justice, 'Prevalence and Characteristics of Violence Toward Women', published in 2017.

<sup>27</sup>Legal Empowerment Network, 'Justice on the Frontline: Tackling Gender Injustice during the Pandemic Event', Panel Discussion, Commission on the Status of Women 65, 18 March 2021.

<sup>28</sup>UN Women & Women Count, 'From Insights to Actions: Gender Equality in the Wake of COVID-19', 2020, <https://bit.ly/2QfBxLf>.

<sup>29</sup>'The Shadow Pandemic', supra note 7; Ridge, Sophy, 'Domestic abuse is the world's hidden pandemic - but victims are being left with nowhere to go', Sky News, 6 March 2021, <https://bit.ly/3w498ah>.

<sup>30</sup>United Nations, 'UN Chief calls for domestic violence 'ceasefire' amid 'horrifying global surge'', UN News, 6 April 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>.

Ministry of Women, Gender, and Diversity in April 2020 than in April of the previous year. The following May, the increase climbed to 27%.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, North Macedonia's Ministry of the Interior reports that the number of complaints of domestic violence in April and May 2020 increased by 44.6%, when compared to the same period in 2019.<sup>32</sup> In South Africa, call centers operated by Vodacom saw a 65% increase in calls from women and children who were confined to their homes and requesting urgent help.<sup>33</sup>

Official statistics do not always tell the full story. In Albania, official police statistics showed a decrease in GBV cases from March through May 2020. HRDC hypothesizes that this is not because GBV case numbers dropped, but the result of diminished reporting rates, as women were unable to move outside the home or access normal communication channels during lockdown. In India, research partner MCF notes that filing complaints by phone during the pandemic is problematic, because women are afraid that their calls are being intercepted or overheard by their spouses. In Nigeria, Women Safe House Sustenance Initiative (WSHSI) estimates that police reports typically reflect one third of the cases brought to local police units; about two-thirds of cases are not transferred from local stations to the central station, which publishes final figures.

## C. INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

Despite the increased need for institutional support for victims and survivors of GBV, this study found that pandemic-related precautionary measures taken by governments impaired the ability of women and girls to seek recourse when subjected to violence. Most of the countries in the study group took the following measures:

**Closure of courts.** The closure of courts, and the attendant suspension or delay of judicial hearings, for varying periods of time limited women's access to justice. Research participants reported that some judiciaries - like Albania's - made exceptions for emergency protection orders or custody cases involving minor children. In other countries, as in Bangladesh and Bulgaria, even hearings for protection orders for

<sup>31</sup>Ministerio de las Mujeres, Géneros y Diversidad, 'Información estadística. Conocé datos y estadísticas sobre la línea 144', Gobierno de Argentina, 2020, <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/generos/linea-144/informacion-estadistica>.

<sup>32</sup>Chulev: Reports on domestic violence increased by 44.6% in April-May compared to last year', Pravidiko, 27 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/2R8sY5C>.

<sup>33</sup>Tanya Farber, 'Shocking stats on gender-based violence during lockdown revealed', Herald Live, 1 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/3oeNsph>.



domestic violence were postponed for months during lockdown, as the relevant courts were not operating, or were not empowered to hold virtual hearings. In South Africa, all trials in criminal cases of GBV were postponed for the majority of 2020. In Uganda, abusers who had been arrested often had to be released within 48 hours because they could not be arraigned in court within 48 hours, as required by law.

Virtual judicial proceedings met with differing degrees of success across the 17 study states. As reported by participants, some countries, like South Africa, permitted courts to conduct remote hearings in cases unrelated to protection orders. Ugandan courts made a few attempts to handle GBV cases online, but the approach posed many challenges for women in rural areas who did not have access to the internet.

**Closure of shelters.** Few state-run victim’s support shelters remained fully operational throughout the pandemic. Those that stayed open did so at reduced capacity to maintain physical distancing. The exception was Argentina, which established additional shelters during the health crisis.<sup>34</sup> In Bangladesh, victim support centers operated by the police, which specialize in providing integrated services to women and children who are victims of GBV, including psychosocial counseling, medical treatment, legal aid, and emergency shelter, stopped their intake for a period of time. Bulgarian shelters required negative COVID-19 tests at the victims’ own expense, which many could not afford.

**Enforcement of curfew, quarantine, or confinement measures.** Across the 17 countries studied, with rare exceptions, women who were fleeing from, or seeking help for, violence at home were not exempted from curfews or movement restrictions. This led to the further victimization of women. In North Macedonia, ESE aided a woman who had been arrested and charged for violation of quarantine while fleeing violence at home.

<sup>34</sup>Ministerio de las Mujeres, Géneros y Diversidad, ‘Medidas en materia de género y diversidad en el marco de la emergencia sanitaria’, Gobierno de Argentina, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3y6aMtV>.



To counterbalance these measures, a few governments took specific steps to address the needs of GBV victims in the context of the pandemic.

**Protocols for handling GBV.** Albania and Argentina issued protocols on how to deal with GBV cases in police interactions, shelters, and health institutions during the pandemic. In the Philippines, the Commission on Human Rights and the Department of the Interior and Local Government published guidelines for gender-responsive interventions useful at the local government level, although SALIGAN noted no substantial changes in practice.

**Remote services.** Government services of all kinds serving GBV victims shifted in-person interactions to phone or online interactions. In Uganda, for instance, the Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development launched a hotline for reporting GBV during the pandemic. Research participants noted that, despite the new channels of communication, government offices were often running on skeleton crews and thus overloaded or slow to respond. In India, MCF reported that, while each state normally offers helpline services, all the lines ceased functioning during the lockdown.

Some key institutional issues arose not as a direct result of policy, but rather due to staffing issues or spillover effects from other sectors.

**Short-staffing of police.** Police inspectors typically assist with GBV cases by conducting investigations and enforcing protective measures. Police units were impacted by the spread of COVID-19 within their ranks and the reorientation of resources toward enforcement of pandemic precautions. FIDA Cameroon observed that in some instances, police refused to receive GBV survivors for fear of contracting COVID-19.

**Reduced access to health institutions.** As overwhelmed healthcare workers focused on pandemic response, victims of GBV found it difficult to obtain urgent medical care. In many cases, telemedicine was not adequate to meet victims' needs. Medical documentation required for police or legal proceedings was hard to acquire.

## A MODEL INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE<sup>35</sup>

In Argentina, various institutions, including the Ministry of Women, Gender, and Diversity, the Judiciary, and the Ministry of Security worked together to strengthen responses in support of people in situations of gender-based violence during the health emergency. Among the measures adopted were the following:

**1.** The Judiciary **automatically extended protection measures** for victims of gender-based violence that were set to expire during the health emergency.

**2. Public services that support GBV cases were strengthened.** Institutions added specialized personnel, improved technological resources, and expanded communication channels (including email, mobile applications such as Whatsapp, and free phone lines). They also launched informative campaigns on what to do in cases of GBV.

**3. Exceptions to preventive social isolation measures:** The government expressly clarified that persons in a situation of gender-based violence are exempted from isolation measures, qualifying as cases of force majeure. Personnel of establishments dedicated to the care of victims of gender-based violence, considered essential and authorized to operate, were also exempted from the lockdown.

**4. A new protocol** was launched to guarantee access to justice with a gender and diversity perspective in the context of social, preventive, and mandatory isolation, which included instructions for police personnel and a complaint form.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.



5. A **committee** was formed to monitor the situation of women and LGBTI+ persons in situations of gender-based violence.

6. The **“Red Masks” Initiative was launched in pharmacies:** An action guide was distributed to help pharmacists act upon the requests of people in situations of GBV.

7. **Community and solidarity ties were strengthened** for prevention and assistance in situations of GBV. In order to strengthen the territorial networks of community accompaniment in cases of GBV, the Directorate of Territorial Cooperation for Victim Assistance was set up. Social and community organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), political organizations, trade unions, religious organizations and community kitchens were invited to articulate actions and promote the generation of joint proposals.

8. The Ministry of Women, Gender, and Diversity sought to **guarantee the mainstreaming of a gender perspective** in all the measures taken by the state, especially in the context of preventive and compulsory social isolation.

9. **Recommendations for provincial and municipal governments** were established regarding gender and diversity policies in the context of the health emergency due to COVID-19.

# THE ROLE OF LEGAL EMPOWERMENT GROUPS



photo Lawyers against Abuse

Legal empowerment organizations often work on the frontline, in direct contact with communities. As public institutions shut down and service providers withdrew from public spaces, many of these groups became the only recourse left to women dealing with violence. At the same time, the proliferation of mandated safety precautions prompted grassroots organizations to reevaluate and reinvent their methods, many of which relied heavily on face-to-face interaction.

## A. MAJOR CHALLENGES

Immediately, a number of challenges presented themselves to legal empowerment groups. Two in particular, discussed below, repeatedly arose in discussions and interviews with research participants.

### IMMOBILITY AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

“While going virtual has been broadly beneficial, as it has been for urban populations, the greatest difficulties are in rural areas, remote places lacking connectivity, and indigenous communities that don’t have the devices or equipment to access virtual resources.”

**Stella Maris Molina** - Fundación Markani, Argentina

The countries examined in this study instituted many precautionary measures in response to the pandemic, ranging from mandatory lockdowns to stay-at-home advisories, closure of offices and other facilities, border closings, curfews, and the closure of public transportation. To varying degrees, these measures restricted the mobility and operations of grassroots groups.

In most countries, GBV or legal support services were considered “non-essential.” Legal empowerment groups were prohibited from opening offices or operating in person. Rare exceptions stood out. Argentina explicitly categorized organizations serving victims of GBV as essential and authorized to operate. In some areas of Bangladesh, particularly those with a presence of Rohingya people, legal services combating GBV were also afforded essential status.

Two of the research participants managed to obtain special permits to conduct their work, so long as certain safety precautions were observed. However, permission was granted only after targeted lobbying and several weeks of intense lockdown - the most crucial time in which services were needed. Lawyers against Abuse (LvA) in South Africa received authorization in May 2020, while FIDA Uganda received permission to function in a few districts, but not all.

rare exceptions stood

For all civil society organizations - even those that obtained authorization to operate - conforming with safety precautions required fundamental changes to their methods and strategies. Travel bans and limitations on the size of gatherings, for example, affected organizations' ability to engage communities and raise awareness using traditional methods. While legal empowerment groups proved resourceful, their reach and effectiveness were inevitably constrained. By scaling back efforts to address GBV, the pandemic exacerbated the situation of women facing abuse situations, as it strained pre-existing inequalities for vulnerable populations across the board.<sup>36</sup>

One key workaround to these restrictions was to offer services remotely. This move introduced yet another layer of inequity, as access to technology was not equally distributed.<sup>37</sup> Portions of the population not only lacked the infrastructure or devices to use the internet, but they also lacked skills and information on how technology can be used to solve their problems. This quandary affected both provider and recipient of services alike.

Geledés, in Brazil, reported that their “popular legal promoters” - citizens trained to help others navigate systems for seeking assistance with GBV - were unable to continue their activities because they lacked access to internet service. This, coupled with a dearth of funds, led to a near-paralysis of the organization, limiting their ability to adapt their work to accommodate emerging justice needs during the pandemic.

The digital divide was even more stark for users of the justice system. Fundación Markani from Argentina, Fundación Construir in Bolivia, and WJI in Guatemala worked closely with rural and indigenous communities, while HRDC in Albania, Gender Alternatives Foundation (GAF) in Bulgaria, and ESE in North Macedonia served Roma women. For these populations, access to devices or the internet was rare. Meanwhile, Indian and African research participants identified rural communities in particular as experiencing significantly reduced access to technology, compounded by a large digital gap between men and women. In some countries, many women did not have access to a basic phone, let alone a smartphone, or a minimum balance of credits for emergency calls. The end result was that countless women in situations of violence had no means of accessing the internet or the virtual tools for support offered by government or civil society.

<sup>36</sup>Ginette Azcona, Antra Bhatt, Jessamyn Encarnacion, Juncal Plazaola-Castaño, Papa Seck, Silke Staab & Laura Turquet, 'UN Women and Women Count, 'From Insights to Actions: Gender Equality in the Wake of COVID-19', UN Women, 2020, p. 2, <https://bit.ly/3o1l2tS>.

<sup>37</sup>United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 'Coronavirus reveals need to bridge the digital divide', UNCTAD, 6 April 2020, <https://unctad.org/news/coronavirus-reveals-need-bridge-digital-divide>.

---

## SUSTAINABILITY AND FUNDING

*“This resource crunch is there, and it is going to come even more in the coming days, because the resources or the money is being relocated to respond to other aspects of the pandemic, and the focus is not really on addressing GBV. From our country's experience we can say that, but I know this debate is all over the world.”*

**Farzana Khan** - My Choices Foundation, India

For civil society organizations, reorienting and reinventing established methodologies came at a cost. Shifting face-to-face activities online required investments in equipment - including laptops, mobile devices, and airtime - as well as training. Unanticipated expenses like personal protective gear, in addition to fuel or private vehicles to replace public transportation, added to the costs. Grassroots groups are resourceful, but there is a limit to what they can accomplish with diminished resources.

Yet, despite ongoing advocacy to the contrary, only 1 out of the 19 research participants could name public funds made available to civil society organizations addressing GBV in their countries. In South Africa, the government created a Solidarity Fund for general COVID-19 purposes, to which corporations and private individuals contributed. A part of the fund was dedicated to addressing GBV; it offered a small injection of temporary funds for civil society organizations working to support GBV survivors.<sup>38</sup>

In a couple instances, research participants succeeded in soliciting foreign donors for contributions to defray costs or resume activities. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, FLD lacked the funds to adapt their Safe House to accommodate women and children who were awaiting test results before entering other parts of the shelter. FLD ultimately secured a grant from the German Embassy to build an isolation room with basic appliances, including a stove and a clothes washing machine, to house new beneficiaries. BLAST received funding to strengthen public awareness of the risks of and responses to DV during the pandemic, and to strengthen a coalition of organizations working to respond to DV.

In Bangladesh and India, requirements for prior government authorization of funding and other restrictions on foreign funding made it difficult to raise additional funds or transfer funds between organizations. In Bangladesh, grants related to COVID-19 response were fast-tracked at the beginning of the pandemic, but beyond that helpful measure, bureaucratic barriers and vigilance over finances overall were not adjusted for emergency situations.

<sup>38</sup>Solidarity Fund, 'Gender-based Violence Intervention 1', Solidarity Fund, March 2021, [https://solidarityfund.co.za/media/2021/03/SF\\_GBVI\\_010321.pdf](https://solidarityfund.co.za/media/2021/03/SF_GBVI_010321.pdf).

Given funding constraints, research participants found it particularly helpful when existing donors allowed for the swift reallocation of grants to address emerging issues. This circumvented the need to spend time fundraising. Some organizations, including WSHSI in Nigeria, received additional funding from donors, but the funds were strictly tied to COVID-19 prevention and not interventions for GBV.

## B. COMMUNITY PARALEGALS AND COMMUNITY-DRIVEN APPROACHES

*“Having a community paralegal model can be very effective in handling gender-based violence since these paralegals can provide local support and keep effective follow up. Rights education and information is the first step towards ending GBV. These paralegals are a great source of awareness building too on various issues. They are accepted in the community and they can build the trust easily.”*

**Farzana Khan** - My Choices Foundation, India

Despite the many obstacles, legal empowerment organizations found creative ways to serve their communities during the pandemic. In a survey of 93 grassroots justice groups in May 2020, 91% of respondents continued to conduct some form of legal empowerment work, while navigating restrictions to movement, dwindling funds, and limited access to technology, transportation, and protective equipment.<sup>39</sup>

Research participants were able to continue serving women due in large part to their use of the community paralegal model and other community-driven approaches. Having generated trust within communities prior to the pandemic, they were in a strong position to follow up with at-risk women and to guide people through the rapidly shifting landscape of online or phone-based support. This dynamic was especially relevant with marginalized communities who harbored a deep skepticism of authorities and government.

*“Another challenge for [toll-free hotlines] is the fact that, even though there is a person on the line, most times GBV survivors prefer that human element of someone you know, for a human being to handle their cases.”*

**Lilian Adriko**, FIDA Uganda

<sup>39</sup>Legal Empowerment Network, 'Covid-19 Justice Challenge Results', Namati, June 2020, <https://community.namati.org/t/key-takeaways-from-the-covid-19-justice-challenge/74947>.



## COMMUNITY LEGAL VOLUNTEERS: RISING TO THE OCCASION

*“ We have trained [the Community Legal Volunteers] to be the first point of contact at community level... [T]hey tipped the scale. They provided more legal aid than even the legal aid officers that we have at the district. ”*

**L. Adriko**, FIDA Uganda

FIDA Uganda trains and deploys community paralegals, known as “Community Legal Volunteers” or “CLVs”, in every district where the organization provides legal aid. CLVs are composed of both state actors (including Community Development Officers and police) as well as non-state actors (including local cultural leaders, local council leaders, and teachers) who have been trained by FIDA Uganda to be the first point of contact at the community level. They handle cases together with legal aid officers from the organization, who provide guidance over the phone or social media.

While the country was under lockdown, public and private transportation was banned. FIDA’s legal aid offices could not receive walk-in clients, nor could staff easily follow up on cases in the community. CLVs, already present on the ground in communities, took on a heightened role in the organization’s operations.

CLVs immediately began raising awareness of GBV issues and publicizing the fact that FIDA Uganda’s services were still available.

*“ ... the CLVs would walk around the communities with the megaphones creating awareness instead of gathering people. This helped us to still continue with our awareness creation activities without actually putting the people at risk of contracting COVID-19. ”*

**E.Z.**, FIDA Uganda

CLVs were also critical to the provision of legal services during the public emergency. FIDA Uganda offered online refresher trainings during the lockdown. During this time, revised working and reporting methods were agreed upon. Due to their proximity and accessibility, CLVs served as the face of the organization for community members experiencing violence during the pandemic. FIDA Uganda's positive experience with CLVs during lockdown prompted them to initiate a nationwide paralegal training after restrictions were lifted.

Research participants could also draw on their experience to determine who to contact and how, for any given need. At the start of the pandemic, for example, MCF in India was able to transition relatively smoothly to remote work because it was able to fall back on their extensive database of prior contacts:

*“When the country was under lockdown and no physical access was possible, we used our database to reach out to our clients, community groups...to check their safety and provide information... Then we started online counseling, out-calling, taking up new cases... We were worried about the field awareness, because physical presence was not possible. Immediately again we used that same database, because we gather all the information for all our awareness programs, for all the colleges and schools and those community groups that we have formed.”*

**Farzana Khan** - My Choices Foundation, India

Because of their grassroots connections, research participants were deeply attuned to community desires and fears. This helped them to design services tailored to the needs of each community. They recognized, for instance, that the impact of the pandemic was felt in many aspects of women’s lives, from the loss of income, to the burden of care for family, to the looming fear of contagion. Sensing this, many of their community paralegals combined their GBV services with humanitarian aid and activities addressing COVID-19 concerns. They met people where they were most likely to be found while observing all safety precautions.

FIDA Cameroon, for example, visited churches and marketplaces that remained open to speak to women while distributing masks and sanitizer. They printed flyers that contained information on both GBV and COVID-19, including “how you can avoid [COVID-19], how you can identify when you are sick, how you can prevent being violated sexually or online during this pandemic.” Similarly, many of MCF’s “PeaceMakers” simultaneously served as paralegals and community health workers (certified by India’s Ministry of Health and Family Welfare as accredited social health activists, or ASHAs). At the onset of the pandemic, these activists were able to educate their communities on both the risks of and responses to GBV and the pandemic as needed.

This Life Cambodia (TLC) provided the families it served with aid packages, including food aid, hand sanitizer, and face masks, to help cover basic needs during lockdown periods. In cases where family members had previously reported or were concerned about domestic violence, TLC included a basic mobile phone in the aid package, so that they could be contacted in case of an emergency. In Nigeria, some WSHSI staff continued to do home visits to at-risk women, accompanied by food supplies, sanitizers, face masks, soap, and medication.

## THE EVOLVING ROLE OF COMMUNITY DEFENDERS

Bolivia's "Comprehensive Law to Guarantee Women a Life Free of Violence" recognizes the role of community promoters ("promotoras comunitarias"), who support victims of violence with networks of women who have survived it or are fighting to overcome it. The law grants community promoters powers of advocacy and coordination of public services, and obliges state and municipal governments to work with them and support their training.<sup>40</sup>

Fundación Construir cultivates these networks of women leaders and strengthens their legal empowerment skills. These "Community Defenders" - the equivalent of community paralegals - educate, serve, and mobilize women in situations of violence. They also collaborate with state actors to ensure the improvement and enforcement of practices and policies relating to GBV.

When a total lockdown was declared in the municipality of Punata, Bolivia, Community Defenders acted quickly to generate greater public awareness of their services and the risks of GBV. They developed a radio program with trainings on gender-based violence and made short videos for dissemination through WhatsApp, social networks, and local television. Their efforts were supported by the municipal government.

When the mayor of Punata authorized food aid to families in need, Community Defenders were among those who delivered humanitarian aid. By doing so, they gained access to otherwise isolated families, some of whom took advantage of visits from community defenders to report cases of GBV.

Community Defenders played an important role in providing assistance and support to victims of violence during the pandemic, selflessly offering up their own resources to account for unanticipated challenges. In some cases, Community Defenders hosted women and children victims of violence in their own homes until a solution could be found for them.

<sup>40</sup> Legal Empowerment Network, 'Legal Empowerment Experiences from Latin America', Namati, January 2018, <https://bit.ly/3uWJROY>.



### c. ADAPTATIONS & INNOVATIONS

*“The new technologies shortened the distances, making it possible to coordinate discussions, advocacy, and campaigns, among other things, with organizations in the region.”*

**Moira Vargas** - Fundaciòn Construir, Bolivia

To conform with pandemic precautions, the legal empowerment organizations in this study embraced technological solutions and reinvented the format of in-person activities. Those that could, tried to maintain a balance of both.

Research participants held conflicting viewpoints on the shift to virtual strategies. Organizations like Geledés in Brazil were essentially immobilized due to their inability to bridge the digital divide, with both community paralegals and community members alike suffering from low connectivity. Some research participants, like GAF in Bulgaria, found remote counselling to be more time-intensive. It took multiple phone sessions to build up the same level of trust and confidence that one face-to-face session could achieve. FIDA Uganda pointed out that some women will always be more comfortable with the human element of in-person interaction.

Other organizations, including MCF in India, felt that technology made it easier to follow up with women and establish deeper, more consistent relationships. WJI in Guatemala credited virtual outreach with expanding the coverage of their legal services to municipalities that they had previously been unable to reach. They further observed that, for some women, the measure of anonymity and convenience that remote services offered was a benefit.

The research participants agreed that while individual clients will have personal preferences, offering a balance of remote and in-person options can maximize the scope of any given initiative. Even after in-person activities fully resume, research participants declared their intention to continue using some of the new technologies and techniques they had adopted during the pandemic.

## IMPROVING MAYAN WOMEN'S ACCESS TO JUSTICE IN RURAL GUATEMALA DURING COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis deeply impacted the communities in which WJI works, exacerbating food insecurity, increasing GBV, and diminishing resources for survivors. Throughout April 2020, WJI staff connected with 73 Community Advocates (community paralegals) over the phone to conduct a needs assessment of their partner communities.

Due to travel limitations and economic constraints, food access was identified as an urgent concern. 80% of advocates had not been able to obtain typical goods. Based on the needs that Community Advocates identified in their communities, WJI developed a three-part COVID-19 response strategy:

**1. Remote Legal and Psychological Services:** WJI staff provided legal and psychological counseling to women over the phone, ensuring that they could access services without traveling or risking COVID-19 exposure. WJI created an intimate partner violence (IPV) hotline via WhatsApp, phone call, or video call. WJI has since provided remote services to 475 women in 100 different communities. These rates reflect the lack of services available to Maya women, especially survivors of violence, in rural Guatemala during the pandemic. The hotline remains active today.

**2. Emergency Food Deliveries:** In its partner communities, WJI delivered 5,200 donated masks and food baskets for 12,825 individuals. By reducing food insecurity, WJI lowered the economic pressure on families, addressing upstream factors that were likely contributing to increased IPV.

**3. Radio Programming:** WJI began working with the Colectivo, a coalition of local organizations, to create and implement informative radio spots throughout rural Guatemala. The Colectivo leveraged its shared assets to mobilize a multifaceted COVID-19 informational campaign to reach the most vulnerable and rural populations in Guatemala. WJI's COVID-19 response radio program with the Colectivo reached an estimated 100,000 indigenous people in over 100 municipalities. Utilizing radio as an accessible technology with widespread coverage during COVID-19 lockdowns brought essential information to a broad range of communities throughout Guatemala at a time of desperate need.

---

## RAISING AWARENESS

*“We knew that during the lockdown people were at home, we knew that they were glued to their TVs and they listened to the radio.”*

**Gladys Mbuyah, FIDA Cameroon**

With GBV rates on the rise during lockdown, research participants sensed a need to increase public awareness about the nature of GBV, the heightened risks faced by women during the pandemic, and resources for protection. Research participants intensified their informational and educational activities, making special efforts to reach marginalized groups of women with limited access to technology and the internet. They often paired their awareness-raising messages with information on their own support services.

Most research participants communicated with the public via television or radio. Community radio had the widest audience, and was particularly useful for reaching women in remote areas. Messages were released in multiple languages, including indigenous languages - a key point for Latin American groups like Fundación Construir. Research participants in Cameroon, Nigeria, and Uganda released catchy jingles so that information would be easy to remember. In South Asia, groups would send representatives to appear on popular talk shows. In Argentina, Fundación Markani arranged with a provincial radio station to use a two-hour block, three times a week, to educate the public on their rights.

Use of social media and online applications expanded significantly during this time. Some research participants began using online platforms in new ways. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, FLD had traditionally hosted an in-person lecture series about protections offered by national GBV legislation and how they could be accessed. During the pandemic, FLD began offering the lectures over social media. The last three live sessions attracted 800 views, and were afterwards shared and viewed over 300,000 times - a far greater reach than the original lecture series. Meanwhile, BLAST, in Bangladesh, added



information on seeking support for domestic violence to its mobile application Sromik Jigyasha, which formerly only contained information on workers' rights and their legal remedies. TLC, in Cambodia, published a guide in both English and Khmer providing concrete guidance on how to support women in situations of domestic violence during lockdown. To maximize accessibility, TLC gathered resources and information on existing services in an online "data room," or shared drive, which was promoted nationally.<sup>41</sup>

Because of disparities in internet access, however, online awareness-raising methods had their limitations. To overcome the digital divide, research participants went as far as permitted to conduct face-to-face outreach within the bounds of pandemic safety restrictions. In Albania, Roma-Egyptian women and women living in rural areas had no access to internet or internet-capable devices. To reach them, HRDC organized face-to-face informative sessions of no more than 10 people at a time. The sessions informed women about how to protect themselves from violence and resolve related problems surrounding divorce, inheritance, property division, discrimination, and other issues. In Uganda, public address systems and megaphones were used to make announcements about women's rights and the availability of GBV support services. After receiving special authorization to resume operations, LvA initiated a massive door-to-door campaign in South Africa. Volunteers, who were trained in the appropriate safety precautions, informed residents about GBV support services, state actor obligations in cases of GBV, and means of holding institutions accountable, among other things. The door-to-door campaigns resulted in a notable increase in cases reported to LvA.

<sup>41</sup>This Life Cambodia, "Domestic Violence during COVID 19 Lockdown: how to influence the inevitable", 2020, <https://thislife.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Domestic-Violence-and-COVID19-Cambodia.pdf>.

## MASS OUTREACH TO INCREASE AWARENESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

As levels of GBV skyrocketed due to pandemic restrictions and the corresponding lack of GBV services, LvA received permission to reopen its Diepsloot Centre in May 2020. The organization then proceeded to launch a massive awareness-raising initiative.

The organization recruited 22 community volunteers to conduct a series of 21 door-to-door campaigns throughout the Diepsloot area. In addition to their extensive training on GBV, and legal rights remedies, and processes, volunteers were also trained on basic facts about COVID-19, safety procedures to follow when conducting door-to-door campaigns, and other available community services. Volunteers received a daily stipend for each day worked, in the form of a voucher for a local supermarket. In addition, they were provided with breakfast and lunch.

Volunteers informed residents about state actor obligations in cases of GBV, available services and legal remedies, how cases should be handled, and the steps community members could take to hold state actors accountable. Volunteers also conferred with community members about the lack of post-rape medical care in the community, inviting them to sign a petition for such services. In addition, volunteers answered questions and distributed printed materials with relevant information and contact details.

From June to August 2020, LvA's staff and community volunteers reached almost 12000 community members through 21 door-to-door campaigns. The campaigns not only helped raise awareness around GBV at the community level, but they also brought information about relevant reporting mechanisms and rights to victims of GBV. LvA reports that as a result of the campaign, there was an increase in GBV victims who came to LvA's centre in Diepsloot for legal and psychosocial support services.





---

## *SUPPORTING WOMEN IN SITUATIONS OF VIOLENCE*

At the heart of research participants' work is the direct support offered to women experiencing gender-based violence. This work includes receiving complaints of GBV, advising and accompanying women through the legal process, and providing or making referrals to psychosocial, medical, or other services. Most of these activities underwent significant transformations during the pandemic.

The few research participants who were exempted from lockdown measures continued their in-person engagement, albeit in a diminished capacity due to the absence of other actors in the larger victim support ecosystem. These legal empowerment groups observed all recommended precautions, including the use of masks, hand cleaning and sanitizing, and social distancing where possible.

For the organizations that did not have "essential" status, in-person engagement took on entirely new forms. In Nigeria, for instance, WSHSI eliminated home visits and replaced them with "community response booths." Booths were set up at easily accessible community structures, such as shops, offices, and people's homes — anywhere local women might feel comfortable walking to and reporting GBV without raising suspicion. The model led to the resolution of 78 cases across 5 pilot communities, with an additional 27 cases pending, a positive success rate.

## COMMUNITY-BASED GBV RESPONSE BOOTHS

In the wake of the increased vulnerability of women and girls to GBV in rural communities in Nigeria's south-western region during the COVID-19 pandemic, WSHSI devised and implemented what were known as "community-based GBV response booths."

“ We decided we could have response points in the local community where the women could actually go to and make reports. So, we did not have to go to each individual's house. This response came from the idea of the regular phone booth, you know where you go to make a phone call or something, but situated in the local community of these women. ”

**W. Ayodele** - Women Safe House Sustenance Initiative, Nigeria

Booths were set up inside stores and businesses (including grocery shops, gas stations, pharmacies, market stalls), churches and mosques, and homes of community members - anywhere local women and girls might feel comfortable walking to and reporting GBV without raising suspicion.

The response booths were designed to: a) provide immediate psychosocial support and mental health care to survivors of GBV; b) provide first aid treatment and medical care to GBV survivors; c) empower GBV survivors through pro bono legal support and advice, by helping them to know the mechanisms available to seek justice, and supporting them to file reports with law enforcement agencies and during the prosecution of the perpetrators in court; d) raise awareness via legal education among local communities about the provisions of the law with regards to sexual and domestic violence; e) ensure shelter support for GBV survivors when necessary, by referring such needs to WSHSI.

Volunteers from within the communities acted as hosts for the response booths, partnering with WSHSI to offer up their businesses and homes. By partnering with local community members and utilizing community spaces that were frequently visited by women, this initiative helped to create safe spaces for women and girls facing sexual and domestic violence, as well as to bring interventions and legal empowerment closer to them.

Since their establishment in May 2020 and until January 2021, community-based GBV response booths received 118 cases of sexual and domestic violence against women. Out of those, 78 cases were resolved by either hosting women in shelters, or providing food, medical supplies, legal services and/or psychosocial support. The remainder of cases are either awaiting response from law enforcement agencies, unresolved, or closed. All told, the response booths received more reports of GBV than available response hotlines. The booth operators helped WSHSI to gather data on the prevalence of varying types problems in a given community - both GBV-related and beyond. An assessment of the data enabled WSHSI to make more informed choices about where to allocate assistance, including food, medical attention, face masks, sanitizers, psychosocial support and other services.

These promising results have convinced WSHSI to continue to develop this model even after the pandemic ends.

Additionally, all organizations who participated in this study made use of telecommunications technologies to provide support to GBV victims. In various combinations, research participants operated telephone hotlines and offered counseling, legal advice, and psychosocial support over the phone, as well as an array of other channels, including Skype, Zoom, email, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), and others. Social media also became a useful reporting tool. Complaints and tips were reported to legal empowerment groups via private messages on Facebook Messenger, Twitter, and Whatsapp. FLD in Bosnia and Herzegovina launched an automated chat bot on Viber (an encrypted messaging platform) to provide information to women who could not safely make a phone call, or who preferred to communicate in writing.

A few research participants used their own dedicated online platforms for receiving reports and counseling victims. ESE in North Macedonia hosted an online legal aid platform, “Ask for Advice,” where women could post questions about domestic violence, divorce, child custody, court procedures for protection orders or criminal prosecutions, and more. The platform was connected to service providers at ESE’s Legal Aid Center. SALIGAN in the Philippines conducted virtual consultations over the pandemic, and later developed a web application for receiving GBV complaints, in partnership with the City of Naga.



## E-SUMBONG: IMMEDIATE RESPONSE AND REFERRAL

In partnership with the Naga City Council for Women (NCCW), SALIGAN developed the online application e-SUMBONG. From the Bicol word “sumbong”, which means to “report”, the app helps GBV victims to easily and safely report abuses against them and their families.

Before the design and development of the app, SALIGAN and NCCW consulted various state actors, including the City Social Welfare Office, Metro PESO, Bantay Familia, Inc., barangay officials, and Violence against Women (VAW) Desk Officers. Together, stakeholders reviewed existing protocol, identified ways to mainstream online reporting into their work, and made commitments to support e-SUMBONG.

E-SUMBONG enhances the existing reporting mechanisms of local government and other agencies at a time when access to remedies are limited by government-mandated lockdowns and COVID-19 risks. Through the app, a user can report violence and select the services she requires, ranging from medical to psychological, psychosocial, economic, legal, and spiritual assistance. The app connects the user to the service provider, which provides an immediate response or referral. Participating providers include the Social Welfare and Development Office, Philippine National Police, Health and Population Department, Metropeso, Department of Justice, and civic and non-governmental organizations.

E-SUMBONG was launched on March 26, 2021 as one of the highlights of Naga City’s Women’s Month celebration.

Legal empowerment groups took special steps to improve the safety of the women approaching them for help. LvA in South Africa issued code words that a woman could use if at any point a perpetrator neared, to signal the end of a session and the need to resume at another time. In Mexico, Equis sought to reduce risk of exposure by providing transportation to women in urgent need of an in-person meeting, thus eliminating the need to take public transportation.

Research participants also looked to improve the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of the women they served. WSHSI of Nigeria, for example, hosted virtual storytelling events for survivors, bringing together hundreds of women to share their powerful experiences. The events aimed to promote rehabilitation and prevention. MCF in India also looked to promote healing and recovery, offering therapeutic services to help survivors overcome their trauma.

## PEACEMAKERS: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO GBV SUPPORT

**Operation PeaceMaker** empowers women to be change-makers in their own communities. “PeaceMakers” undergo 4 weeks of intensive training in family and marriage counseling, as well as aspects of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, followed by a 6-month internship. Their main responsibility is to interact with fellow women who might be facing abuse and to help them get counseling, legal aid, or other support. The PeaceMaker initiative seeks to reduce domestic violence in India through the deployment of thousands of PeaceMakers/paralegals. The initiative has handled more than 10,000 cases to date.

The activities of Operation PeaceMaker are divided into two main strategies: intervention and prevention.

**Intervention:** Operation PeaceMaker provides support, relief, and opportunities for rehabilitation to women, children, and families who have undergone domestic violence, child sexual abuse, or any other kind of violence. Through the PeaceMaker program’s counseling centers, helpline support, legal aid, safe home, and partnership with the local police, MCF offers counseling, medical and legal aid, and other resources, including art and music therapy to help women cope with traumatic experiences.

**Prevention:** Through prevention programs, Operation PeaceMaker aims to ensure that the cycle of abuse is stopped before it even begins. MCF has developed tailor-made curriculums for each demographic of society to sensitize and educate community members about issues of gender, masculinity, violence, gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, and relevant laws. Prevention programs also train people to identify signs of abuse in their friends and family members.

---

### STRENGTHENING INTERNAL OPERATIONS

“*The pandemic has forced our team to learn to use various technologies and adapt to them in order to get the job done. This has had the added benefit of having made some of our processes more efficient.*”

**Andrea Tock** -Women’s Justice Initiative, Guatemala

Technology proved especially useful in helping research participants improve their internal operations, as well. The most immediate effect was the maintenance of connections among staff who were sheltering in place at home, rather than working together in communities, at an office, or at a legal aid center. Research participants report that virtual communications tools also strengthened relationships with national and international counterparts.

With the uptake of digital tools, research participants took the opportunity to hone their skills at remote training of paralegals. ESE is presently developing three video-based e-training modules for paralegals, focusing on the basics of legal empowerment, domestic violence and legal remedies, family and inheritance law, and more. Meanwhile, BLAST is using online training tools to teach their paralegals and staff about the use of technology, digital security, domestic violence, child marriage, as well as laws on sexual harassment, child marriage, and rape.

During this extremely stressful time, legal empowerment organizations also recognized the need for self-care among their own community paralegals and workers. Themis authorized telework and flexible hours for its staff, in addition to arranging for mental health care for their team and community paralegals, or popular legal promoters (PLPs). Themis also distributed food support, subsistence allowances, institutional telephones, and computer equipment to workers. Geledés arranged access to social benefits for their PLPs and raised funds to purchase food baskets for those who were most at-risk or faced economic hardships.

Research participants recognized ongoing challenges relating to online fatigue, capacity building, digital security, and surveillance, but on the whole they emphasized the benefits.

## LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY TO ENHANCE ACCESS TO JUSTICE DURING THE PANDEMIC

In order to stay operational during the country-wide lockdown, BLAST adapted its existing legal services to virtual platforms in the following ways:

- Developing and broadcasting audio bites and videos on social media, FM radio, and cable networks. Through media, BLAST sought to raise public awareness about violence affecting women, children, and transgendered persons, as well as the availability of protective services and helplines.
- Conducting phone surveys to map operational GBV services during the pandemic.
- Introducing emergency helplines across 15 districts for survivors.
- Developing and broadcasting an interview series with scholars, activists, and lawyers working closely with domestic violence-related issues, as a means of raising awareness.
- Revising and scaling-up use of BLAST's Sromik Jiggyasha mobile app for paralegals. It now incorporates information on remedies for domestic violence, video advocacy messages, and guidance on virtual court hearings.
- Setting up a dedicated website, creating online content, and holding consultations with the police and other authorities on improving coordinated responses to GBV. The effort was organized through the Citizens' Initiative against Domestic Violence (CIDV), a coalition of 25 civil society organizations, for which BLAST is a Secretariat.
- Holding a webinar series for paralegals, researchers, and lawyers on using domestic laws to ensure protection from GBV of women and children in the Rohingya community.
- BLAST also designed and conducted a number of online trainings.
  - ...for paralegals on using technology to respond to telephone advice requests, registering online complaints with the police, coordinating awareness programmes, case work, and campaigning.
  - ...for a pro bono lawyers' network on virtual court procedures.
  - ...for paralegals and lawyers on responding to GBV victims.

## D. RELATIONSHIP WITH GOVERNMENT

“ Basically, if there is a legal tool, we are using it. So we are both enemies of the state and cooperate with the state, depending on the situation. ”

**Milena Kadieva**, Gender Alternatives Foundation, Bulgaria<sup>42</sup>

During the pandemic, ensuring rapid and efficient responses to GBV was a priority for legal empowerment organizations. Depending on the context, this required taking up and publicizing support services, working with governments to expand or improve their services, or advocating for changes to public policy and practice. Research participants found themselves treading a delicate balance between aiding and collaborating with the state, and exposing state violations or demanding reform.

---

### COLLABORATION

“ A number of times, the police could not be found or phoned, but FIDA, through the Community Legal Volunteers who are based within the communities, received phone calls on violations. . .  
[!]n places where FIDA legal officers were unable to reach, [women] were able to reach out to the police to go and respond in a timely manner. And that kind of coordination played a big role... in addressing gender-based violence that women suffer in Uganda. ”

**Geofry Ochieng** - FIDA Uganda

Research participants experimented with a variety of collaborative arrangements with governments throughout the pandemic. Parties acknowledged shortcomings and resource constraints on all sides, engaging in joint activities that emphasized comparative strengths. Cooperative activity tended to focus on local institutions, or on those with an existing presence among a given target population. In most cases, partnerships arose out of prior collaboration, and the public emergency offered an opportunity to deepen existing relationships.

In May 2020, Themis signed a formal agreement with the local judiciary, women's community networks, and a university in the city of Canoas. Within this multi-stakeholder partnership, courts compiled lists of women who had been granted protection orders and shared those lists with Themis, who in turn distributed them to its PLPs. The PLPs would monitor the women, calling them over the phone to check in on them, offer guidance, and advise on resources and services. The initiative has met with success and has the potential to become permanent after the pandemic.

<sup>42</sup>In this case, Milena's use of the term “enemies of the state” is a reference to GAF's production of CEDAW shadow reports for review by United Nations Human Rights Treaty bodies, as well as the submission of cases against the country before the European Court of Human Rights. Most recently, GAF prepared and presented a shadow report before the 75th CEDAW Committee session on 10-28 January 2020.



## A COOPERATIVE AGREEMENT WITH THE JUDICIARY

To help monitor women in situations of violence, Themis developed a formal partnership between their community paralegals, also known as “popular legal promoters” or PLPs, and the Special Court of Domestic and Family Violence. A cooperation agreement was signed in May 2020 in the city of Canoas, Brazil.

The initiative serves women who have been granted Emergency Protective Measures (MPUs), provided for by the Maria da Penha Law. Protective Measures are a primary mechanism for ensuring women’s safety from violence. These judicial measures protect a victim and her family by removing the aggressor from their home or requiring that he keep a minimum distance from them.

Under the cooperative agreement, courts were to compile lists of women who had been granted MPUs and share those lists with Themis, who in turn distributed them to its PLPs. Using mobile phones provided by Themis, the PLPs would contact the women to check in on them, offer guidance, advise on resources and services, and periodically monitor their status.

“ *When it comes to the service, Themis brings something that already exists but needs to be examined more carefully, because it is a weakened service. The new legislation solved the problem of the extent of the protection measures. But to monitor its effectiveness, it is essential that you have someone, a non-state public service, to monitor protective measures. This can be the basis of a public policy, institutionalized and replicated.* ”

**Marcia Soares** - Themis, Brazil

Since the beginning of this initiative in June 2020, almost 300 women have been helped by the work of the community paralegals (PLPs). By directly monitoring compliance with MPUs, the community paralegals contribute to preserving the physical and psychological integrity of women while strengthening and enforcing the law. Given the judiciary's limitations during the pandemic, the work of Themis' PLPs offers a much-needed alternative source of care, ensuring smoother transitions into the greater safety network of reference centers, shelters, and social assistance. This collaboration also had the added benefit of strengthening relations with the formal justice system.



FIDA Uganda reinforced informal partnerships with local community justice actors, including police, court personnel, community influencers, members of local governance structures, and community leaders mandated by law to provide basic services. Going into the pandemic, the majority of existing GBV services in the country were run by civil society; government ministries and departments, including the Ministry of Gender, Labor, and Social Development, did not have adequate funds to execute their mandate.

To continue their work, FIDA Uganda obtained permits from authorities in some districts to move about and serve women. FIDA identified specific allies within government at the district level, working closely with the Community Development Officer, Labor Officer, and Social Welfare and Probation Officer. In several districts, FIDA Uganda maintained a cooperative relationship with the police, with whom they allocated cases and shared resources. Collaborative arrangements have been fruitful enough that the parties are looking to formalize joint activities after the pandemic. Fundraising has begun to support one-stop centers with police and health workers to provide integrated services for GBV survivors.

## COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS, STRONGER RESPONSES

FIDA Uganda worked closely with local police in numerous districts to address GBV cases during the pandemic. The nature of the collaboration in each district depended on the resources available.

In Mbale, FIDA Uganda made their vehicle available to the police so that they could investigate cases reported to them. In exchange, the police provided security for the organization's staff when they carried out their work. In Lwengo district, police officers joined FIDA Uganda in appearances on radio talk shows where they discussed available legal aid services. Members of the FIDA team also worked from the police station, sitting with the Child and Family Protection Unit and taking up GBV cases when reported. In the Karamoja region, the police allowed FIDA Uganda to use their vehicles to transport victims to the hospital or safe spaces.

Strong relationships with the police helped FIDA Uganda to secure permission to remain operational in certain districts. In Kotido district, FIDA Uganda joined the COVID-19 response district task force, which enabled greater movement for staff in outreach to clients, leading to a more comprehensive response.

A survivor's story demonstrates one of the many ways in which cooperation between police and civil society can reduce violence.

*In Lwengo, there was a case of a woman who had been brutally assaulted by her husband. The woman's daughter reported the attack to FIDA and directed them to the hospital where she was being treated. Due to FIDA's strong relationship with the local police, they were able to arrange for the police officer to come to the hospital to take the victim's statement from her hospital bed.*

*A case of domestic violence and assault was opened against the woman's husband. The woman, however, did not want to proceed with the case and pleaded with the FIDA team not to take the matter to court. After some counselling, FIDA and the woman agreed to seek an alternative route: securing and enforcing a commitment on the part of her husband to cease violence, with the help of FIDA and the police.*

*The husband signed an agreement to report to police on a weekly basis in order to track the situation in the home. Seven months after this agreement was reached, the FIDA Community Legal Volunteer in the area followed up with the woman. She shared that she is living peacefully with her husband and that the violence in their home had ceased.*

Similarly, in Nigeria, FIDA developed a mutually beneficial relationship with the National Agency for Prohibition Against Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), a federal law enforcement agency. NAPTIP operated a rapid response unit that was available 24/7 during the lockdown period. NAPTIP officers worked cooperatively with FIDA Nigeria lawyers to pursue GBV cases. In addition, some judges who led mobile courts during the lockdown were members of FIDA Nigeria, and would refer GBV cases to them when encountering women in need of legal services.

A few research partners noted that the shift to virtual communication, imposed by pandemic restrictions, had the unexpected benefit of improving relationships with government. Specifically, moving events online opened up opportunities for expanding state participation. MCF observed that, due to the unprecedented option to join remotely, “state authorities who were earlier not able to participate in discussions due to time constraints joined many discussions and agreed to provide support.”

“*Going virtual allowed us to have a more fluid relationship with judicial personnel, which leads to better access to justice for the women we serve. It was important to have their presence at virtual informational and training events, so that they could hear firsthand the diverse situations encountered by women experiencing violence during the pandemic.*”  
**Stella Maris Molina** - Fundación Markani, Argentina

---

#### COMPLEMENTARITY

In some contexts, partnerships were not viable due to the absence of the state in the ecosystem of GBV responders. In these cases, civil society sought to fill the vacuum with whatever resources they had available. In Albania, HRDC observed that the only services to remain fully operational during the pandemic — including hotlines, victim’s support centers, and shelters — were those provided by civil society organizations.

In India, MCF reported that, after the state hotlines closed during lockdown, grassroots groups took up the responsibility. In addition to launching a helpline, MCF sought to fill the gaps left by other state services out of necessity. At times, the stakes were extremely high.

“*The police were also not available. In fact, if you want me to share that one particular experience that we had: the husband broke the boy's hand, the girl was beaten up, and she had nobody to go to, because no records were allowed, there is no public transport there. We intervened to rescue her from that abusive situation and took her to her parents' house because they were living in that direction. So, such basic, life-saving things are not available. Forget about the courts, forget about charity homes or other facilities.*”  
**Farzana Khan** - My Choices Foundation, India

In South Africa, LvA struggled to recreate an effective response network in the absence of so many state actors.

“*If the Department of Social Development, Child Protection, social workers are not working, and now you know we have a case of suspected abuse or neglect ongoing that we need to report, there is nobody in Diepsloot.*”

**L. Henson** - LvA, South Africa

LvA ultimately provided legal advice and counseling over the phone, email, Whatsapp, or their website, and utilized various social media platforms to let clients know how their lawyers could be reached.

---

#### CAPACITY BUILDING

Building rapid and adequate response mechanisms requires the involvement of a broad array of public institutions, not just entities that specialize in GBV. Public servants across sectors must understand the issue, know how to work with women in situations of violence, and recognize how to comply with relevant laws and policies. Throughout the pandemic, legal empowerment groups worked closely with justice institutions, police, and other actors to build capacity among their ranks. Civil society organizations provided online trainings, informal consultations to solve problems, and limited in-person trainings.

“*It happens that [service providers] do not know even the old law that has been approved many years ago, now upgraded with recent legal changes, such as the removal from the perpetrator, risk assessment course, or the new protection lawsuit to be issued by the police. So it is very important that all service providers have knowledge of the legal responsibilities they have regarding the implementation of legislation, in order to, at the end, provide effective support to the victims of gender-based violence.*”

**Aferdita Prroni** - Human Rights in Democracy Center, Albania

In Cambodia, TLC noted that legislation on combating GBV was substantively strong, but poorly enforced. They state, “[w]e have a very good law, but the implementation is very limited [...]. So, our role is to refresh the mainstream law and provide capacity-building to those mechanisms so they can do their jobs better, know their roles and responsibilities to respond to GBV issues, and how to support women better.” HRDC in Albania likewise offered capacity-building opportunities to update bureaucrats on amendments to laws that affect the handling of GBV cases, as well as to connect different service providers to each other to facilitate referrals. To that end, on-line training was offered to police, health institutions, teachers, representatives from municipalities, and more.

Some organizations focused on gender sensitivity trainings, rather than capacity building around specific laws or policies. FLD in Bosnia and Herzegovina trained incoming police officers on how to respectfully and effectively receive women reporting GBV. In India, MCF worked with a police commissioner during the pandemic to train 3,000 police officers on how to handle GBV cases in a more gender-sensitive manner. Often, the best teachers on the issue are survivors themselves, who can speak to duty bearers within government about their experiences living through violence and navigating the legal system. Legal empowerment organizations like Fundación Markani of Argentina connected these two constituencies as a means of effectively conveying to authorities the need for gender sensitivity in their work.

---

#### ACCOUNTABILITY

*“Equipping people and empowering people to be able to hold the justice system accountable in their own right... It is not just the work that LvA is doing, but it is something that the community is doing more broadly.”*

**Lindsay Henson** - Lawyers against Abuse, South Africa

In the course of their work, legal empowerment groups are constantly interfacing with public institutions and state actors. One of their core functions is to ensure that government agents comply with the law and that systems for obtaining legal redress are functioning correctly. This did not change during the global pandemic.

HRDC of Albania described its role during the pandemic as monitoring institutions that do not proceed in accordance with the law. HRDC pointed to cases where police failed to issue a protective order or make a referral for women who had reported a crime. In these cases, HRDC worked with the police to identify and resolve problems in case management, “making sure that the law is being implemented and beneficial to women that suffered violence.”

Similarly, MCF in India focused on pushing prosecutors to fulfill their mandate and take up cases of GBV. LvA in South Africa launched a campaign urging the public to hold state actors accountable if they do not uphold the protections outlined by law for victims of GBV. In the course of its work, ESE in North Macedonia used multiple methods to push public institutions to fulfill their duties.

## ROSICA'S JOURNEY: HOLDING INSTITUTIONS TO ACCOUNT

In April 2020, Rosica, a 32-year-old mother of two minor children, contacted ESE by phone. At the time, a four-day quarantine was in effect, accompanied by a complete ban on movement.

Rosica had first sought ESE's help in 2018 for earlier acts of violence committed by her husband. Due to fears of economic hardship and lack of health insurance in the face of a second pregnancy, Rosica ultimately decided against initiating procedures against him. During the pandemic, however, the violence escalated and Rosica reached out again.

ESE immediately provided Rosica with psychosocial support, gathered the necessary information, and referred Rosica to a health institution that could attend to her bodily injuries. ESE then instructed her on how to report the case at the proper police station - located in the city of the family summer home, where the most severe incident occurred - and at a Center for Social Affairs (CSA) in the city where she sought to take refuge, with whom she could initiate temporary protection measures.

At this point, the system began to break down for Rosica. CSAs, despite being exempted from bans on movement during the state of emergency, had ceased in-person interactions and only permitted reporting of domestic violence via phone. However, CSA staff was rarely available by phone, leaving Rosica unable to lodge a complaint either in-person or by phone. The police, which often transfers victims to their local CSA as a matter of course, failed to make an immediate referral in Rosica's case. Meanwhile, Rosica was charged high fees for her medical treatment, but the inability to report her problem made it impossible for her to obtain the written confirmations by which a registered victim of domestic violence may receive free healthcare to treat her injuries. Rosica had essentially fallen into an inter-sectoral gap in GBV services.

ESE pushed these institutions to correct their oversights. ESE switched to using electronic communications with the relevant actors, finding them more responsive to e-mail. For the CSA problem, ESE went up the ladder of authority, ultimately pressuring the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy to facilitate the scheduling of Rosica's CSA appointment. The nature of her case qualified for one-time financial assistance, followed by a guaranteed minimum of assistance. ESE also liaised with the health insurance provider to secure medical coverage for Rosica's treatment.

ESE provided Rosica with free legal representation and financial support for court costs, pertaining to issuing temporary protective measures, divorce procedures with a request for custody of the children, payment of alimony, and two criminal cases against her husband and father-in-law. ESE connected with police stations in the city where the violence occurred, as well as the city where Rosica took refuge afterwards, who jointly acted on Rosica's case. ESE also assisted Rosica with an out-of-court settlement for the division of property within the marriage, which is still ongoing. After completion of the criminal procedures, ESE will initiate civil proceedings for compensation or damages based on the anticipated convictions. Rosica's journey is not over, but the system is now working for her as it should.

“Legal empowerment groups should work to ensure that policies and personnel are in place to respond to GBV at the community levels even in emergency situations. putting the issue of GBV as secondary to livelihood and health of the communities made the responses slow, to a certain point, deprioritized by government agencies.”

**Hazel E. Lavitoria** - SALIGAN, Philippines

Civil society organizations are continually accompanying women through the legal process. As such, they amass significant data from user experience, which can be useful for assessing the integrity and effectiveness of the legal system. In other words, legal empowerment groups are constantly testing what works and what doesn't work, whether by design or as a result of implementation. This knowledge is invaluable when advocating for better policies and laws.

During the pandemic, research participants continued to advocate for their ongoing policy priorities, in addition to demanding urgent implementation of measures and allocation of funds for improving the institutional response to GBV cases during the global health crisis. They directed their advocacy efforts towards governments, ministries, institutions, social work centers, police, and the judiciary.

Based on its experiences serving GBV victims during North Macedonia's "state of emergency and limited movement," ESE undertook a series of advocacy activities to address women's emerging justice needs. ESE called on relevant actors to: authorize the issuance of temporary measures of protection without a court hearing, implement a comprehensive national awareness-raising campaign about domestic violence and legal mechanisms for protection through traditional and alternative communication channels; establish a State fund for victim's support; prioritize domestic violence cases and institutional proceedings during the pandemic, including increasing coordination among Centers for Social Welfare, police, courts, and health and other institutions. Beyond direct engagement with the government, ESE sought to increase the pressure to take on these urgent measures through press releases, media statements, and participation on national TV shows. Their efforts are ongoing.



In Bangladesh, BLAST undertook online advocacy campaigns calling on state authorities to support, strengthen, and adapt their responses to victims of GBV. They convened the Rape Law Reform Coalition, a group of 17 organizations that submitted a 10-point demand for the reform of rape laws to various ministries, the Law Commission, and media. BLAST held consultations with police and other service providers, highlighting Supreme Court directives on processing rape complaints and pushing for the option to lodge complaints online. In addition, they lobbied the Chief Justice of Bangladesh to permit virtual courts to issue emergency protection, residence, safe custody, and compensation orders in cases of domestic violence. BLAST also conducted webinars for national Bangladeshi newspapers and other regional and international organizations to examine issues of rape, child marriage and domestic violence. In response to these efforts, the police activated online processes for receiving complaints, ensured police assistance for women seeking shelter outside the home, committed to activate help desks for women and vulnerable persons at police stations, and activated limited online court proceedings.

In Nigeria, when a series of high-profile cases of violence against women during lockdown sparked nationwide protests, FIDA Nigeria saw an opportunity to advance their existing advocacy work on the adoption of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act by state governments.

*“Because of the alarming increase in SGBV during the lockdown, most of these states, the states that have not adopted it, gave a commitment. They were now interested and seeing the importance of adopting this VAPP law, this law on domestic violence to be a form of deterrent and a measure to stop acts of GBV in the states.”*  
**Patrice Imazona** - FIDA Nigeria

FIDA Nigeria directed their advocacy around the domestication of the VAPP Act toward State Governors, the Houses of Assembly and traditional rulers at community level. They plan to continue their advocacy throughout and beyond the pandemic.

5

# LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

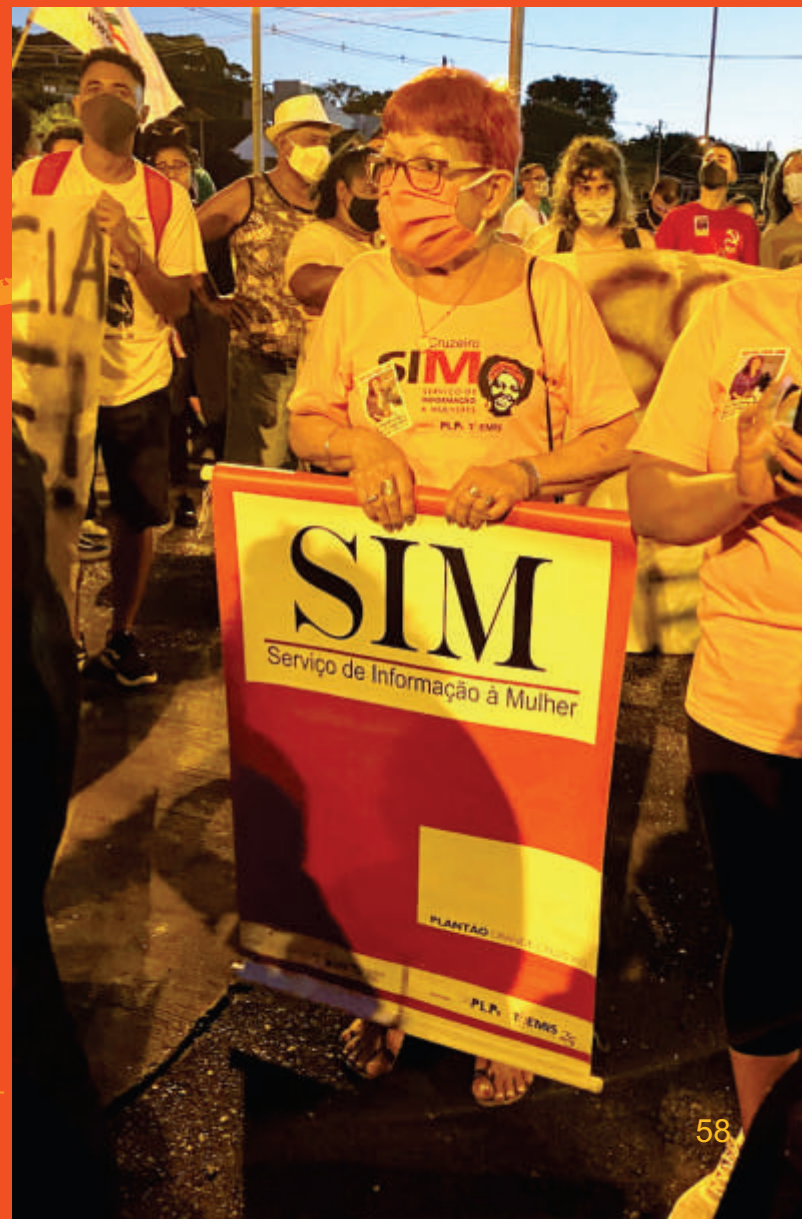


photo THEMIS

This report marks the beginning of a journey towards building collective knowledge on the role of legal empowerment in improving lives and reducing inequalities. Participatory research initiatives like this one focus the efforts of multiple organizations on the same questions - enabling us to collectively address knowledge gaps that no single organization could take on alone. In this case, the research participants - all members of the Legal Empowerment Network - detected valuable opportunities for comparative learning around the diverse methods used to advance gender justice across different contexts. During the course of our research, we constructed a space for mutual support and solidarity, strengthened relationships within our community of practice, and engaged in meaningful and comparative reflection on our work, which will ultimately help us to refine our approaches going forward.

In addition to enriching the work and strategic thinking of research participants, this research surfaced practical insights that can inform future action aimed at protecting women in situations of violence, particularly in emergency or crisis settings.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE COVID-19 CRISIS

One year into the pandemic, structural inequalities continue to determine who suffers the most. Hit with subsequent waves of COVID-19, countries are reinstating stay-at-home orders and enacting travel bans, with women bearing the brunt of the impact. Experts predict that it will take two more years to produce enough doses of vaccine to cover the world's population.<sup>43</sup> In the meantime, grassroots actors, governments, multilateral institutions, donors, and other actors can improve their responses by learning from initial experiences under the pandemic. Drawing from the grassroots experiences of the 19 legal empowerment organizations who contributed to this research, we recommend the following:

**Designate access to justice and GBV services as “essential.”** Justice services, health services, safe spaces, and economic assistance are critical to the safety and survival of women subject to violence. As recommended by the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, the administration of justice should be among the essential public services that continue to function in times of

<sup>43</sup>Anthony McDonnell , Robert Van Exan , Steve Lloyd , Laura Subramanian , Kalipso Chalkidou , Adrian La Porta , Jiabin Li , Eddine Maiza , David Reader , Julie Rosenberg , Jack Scannell , Vaughan Thomas , Rebecca Weintraub and Prashant Yadav, 'COVID-19 Vaccine Predictions: Using Mathematical Modelling and Expert Opinions to Estimate Timelines and Probabilities of Success of COVID-19 Vaccines', CGD Policy Paper No. 183, Center for Global Development, October 2020, p. 35, <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/covid-19-vaccine-predictions>.

crisis. “Special emphasis” should be placed on violence against women; states should “strengthen means of prevention and care for victims of domestic violence and gender-based violence.”<sup>44</sup>

Accordingly, when preoccupied with enforcing pandemic safety measures, governments should not divert resources away from GBV support services within hospitals and police departments. Shelters should remain open during lockdown periods. Courts should reduce barriers to justice while demand for GBV support surges, for example by authorizing judges to issue protection measures through interim orders rather than full hearings.<sup>45</sup> Where useful, they should also invest in adequate equipment and training for judges and court officers to conduct virtual proceedings.

**Authorize civil society groups serving GBV victims to continue working during lockdown periods.** Legal empowerment organizations are integral to comprehensive GBV response schemes, but their ability to serve marginalized women is severely hampered by stay-at-home orders, travel bans, and enforced office closures. Staff and community paralegals working with legal empowerment groups should be exempted from mobility restrictions, so long as they take appropriate safety precautions. An exception to the enforcement of curfews and quarantines must also be made for women escaping situations of violence.

**Provide flexible and rapid funding for legal empowerment organizations.** When the pandemic paralyzed societies, legal empowerment organizations moved swiftly. In a show of persistence and solidarity, they adapted to shifting safety guidelines and emergency measures. The research participants successfully reached women in urgent need, yet they often lacked the resources to fully implement their ideas or take them to scale.

There is a clear need for rapid funding for legal empowerment groups in times of crisis. Emergency initiatives like the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund provided flexible infusions of resources that helped legal empowerment groups to adapt to the unique circumstances of the pandemic. Thus far, the fund has distributed \$400,000 to 30 legal empowerment organizations working to respond to and rebuild from the global crisis.<sup>46</sup> In terms of existing grants, donors should allow for reallocation of grants to address emerging issues. By empowering grantees to repurpose funds to address GBV and pandemic-related challenges, donors can offer a much needed lifeline.

<sup>44</sup>The coronavirus disease (COVID-19), supra note 8, para. 112. “States should take the necessary steps to prioritize criminal situations that have increased exponentially during the pandemic. Special emphasis should be placed on gender-based violence, domestic violence and corruption. The Special Rapporteur calls on States to strengthen means of prevention and care for victims of domestic violence and gender-based violence.”

<sup>45</sup>UN Women, IDLO, UNDP, UNODC, World Bank and The Pathfinders. ‘Justice for Women Amidst COVID-19’, New York, 2020, pp. 34-35, <https://bit.ly/3tj05dl>.

<sup>46</sup>COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund, ‘Grantees’, 2020, <https://www.covidjusticefund.org/>.

**Encourage collaborative relations between civil society and government, especially among community-level justice actors.** Research participants entered into a variety of collaborative arrangements and achieved promising results with local authorities, including police, local government representatives, court personnel, and public service providers. State and civil society actors should look to these examples for inspiration, and experiment with ways of deepening or improving upon them.

**Recognize the unique role played by community paralegals in advancing gender justice during the pandemic.** Because paralegals work closely with women in excluded communities, they have earned a rare level of trust and access that can help in disseminating vital information, services, and humanitarian aid. UN Women has observed that, as the digital gender gap threatens to further exclude women from life-saving services, “community based paralegal organizations play an important role in addressing...needs and gaps by broadening knowledge of law and recourse to justice.”<sup>47</sup> Governments and civil society should work together to ensure that community paralegals are appropriately supported and integrated into GBV and pandemic response efforts.

**Protect frontline grassroots justice workers.** Legal empowerment actors undertake highly stressful work at great risk to themselves, their families, and their colleagues. Many, including key members of our research teams during the course of this study, contracted COVID-19 to the detriment of their health and work. Legal empowerment groups should take special steps to address self-care among grassroots workers and volunteers, offering resources to assist with their physical, emotional, and economic well-being. As vaccines become available, states should afford frontline justice workers from civil society the same priority level as their government counterparts, such as social workers and justice services personnel.

**Use Technology Appropriately.** Technology can be a powerful tool, but is not a panacea for the absence of in-person support for women in situations of violence. Relying solely on digital tools for the provision of critical services risks the “elitization” of justice systems, effectively excluding all women without access to technology or training.<sup>48</sup> Justice service providers should take care to calibrate the use of technologies to their target communities’ needs, capacity, and preferences. Meanwhile, grassroots actors like community paralegals can help people to gain technical skills and understand how technology can help to resolve justice problems.

<sup>47</sup>Justice for Women Amidst’, *supra* note 45, p. 6.

<sup>48</sup>The coronavirus disease (COVID-19)’, *supra* note 8, para. 114.

## BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

**Prepare state actors for crises.** Countries must prepare for emergencies before they occur, so that responses can be effective, non-discriminatory, and informed by experience. As such, governments should:

**Proactively establish protocols to guide emergency actions impacting marginalized groups.** The groups in question (whether defined by gender or other characteristics) should have a role in developing and approving these protocols, ideally through a participatory process open to civil society and the public. Having experienced how protocols released during the pandemic played out in practice, legal empowerment groups will have meaningful contributions to this discussion.

**Build capacity across all sectors.** The impacts of any crisis are never gender-neutral. Nor can the problems causing or arising from GBV be resolved within the justice sector alone. Capacity building measures should be undertaken across sectors, incorporating actors focusing on health, education, labor, land, and more. Training should help state actors to understand the impact of their work on women, the ways in which non-gender-sensitive responses can magnify inequalities, and how to treat or interact with women in situations of violence.

**Take an intersectional approach to gender-based violence.** This report explored the intersection of GBV and the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as other factors that combine to exacerbate discrimination, including ethnicity, socio-economic status, geographic location, and unequal access to technology. Policies and protocols aimed at protecting women must address how women are affected by overlapping forms of oppression. Responses to GBV should also account for the ways in which GBV affects marginalized groups, including people with disabilities, children, transgender people, and ethnic minorities, as well as refugees, stateless persons, and migrants.

It bears noting that, because community paralegals are embedded in communities, they understand the many ways in which a given community's mix of social identities can contribute to injustice. As a result, paralegals are well-placed to take an intersectional approach to addressing the discrimination and exclusion of women within the justice system. This deserves recognition within government strategies for preventing and responding to GBV.

**Continue to build on cooperation between state and civil society.** During the pandemic, legal empowerment groups worked with scarce resources to create alternative solutions where public services faltered. Research participants struck a balance between collaborating with, complementing, and confronting the state. These forms of engagement produced positive results in different ways. All stakeholders must learn from these experiments, and continue to explore avenues of cooperation to inform ongoing efforts to advance gender justice.

**Support and expand the work of grassroots actors such as community paralegals.** Strengthening and scaling holistic grassroots support - the specialty of community paralegals - is fundamental to protecting women in situations of violence. As mentioned above, community paralegals are often members of the communities they serve, or have engaged with these communities over an extended period. As such, they are able to build trust and forge close ties with women victims and survivors — a critical asset for one who must accompany women through traumatic experiences and daunting legal processes. Paralegals' proximity to communities not only proves useful in serving marginalized communities beyond the reach of state support, but it also gives them special insight into how laws work on the ground. This experience can be useful for informing law and policy. These and other benefits affirm the need to expand and support the presence of community paralegals.

**Sustain a mix of virtual and in-person engagement.** Online and in-person engagement serve different populations and needs. Each has benefits and drawbacks, but together they can contribute to a comprehensive and effective outreach strategy. Governments and civil society should strive to strike a balance between the two. As mentioned above, decisions on how to deploy technology should be informed by the needs, capacity, and preferences of communities. Both civil society and government should explore the potential of technological applications to improve data collection and movement-building. Moving forward, more attention must be paid to issues of digital and personal security, the dangers of surveillance, and the safeguarding of confidential data.

**Address the digital divide.** Before the pandemic, the digital gender gap raised troubling questions about inequality and access. With the arrival of COVID-19, it became a life-threatening problem, particularly for women in rural areas and marginalized communities. Governments should take action to close the digital divide by promoting universal access to the internet and adopting policies that foster digital literacy and digital skills. However, meaningful empowerment will only come with knowledge about the potential uses of technology, and how it can be used to solve one's problems, including justice problems. With it, women can imagine ways of reducing violence that respond to their needs and reflect their realities. Grassroots justice actors should make efforts to build this knowledge within their communities.



**Fund legal empowerment efforts sustainably.** Building back better from the pandemic calls for more just and resilient systems for serving the needs of women and girls. While the advocacy efforts of research participants aim to move states and societies in the right direction, working towards systems change requires years of continued support. Governments and donors should commit to providing flexible, consistent, and long-term investment to the essential work of legal empowerment organizations who fight for gender justice.<sup>49</sup>

Presently, a group of global organizations is working to launch a global Legal Empowerment Fund.<sup>50</sup> The fund's goal is to mobilize \$100 million over ten years to close the global justice gap. It will provide renewable, core funding to frontline organizations deploying legal empowerment strategies, with a particular focus on their long-term resilience, innovation, and capacity building. In so doing, it seeks to address the inadequate legal protections and lack of access to justice that deny the world's most marginalized communities the ability to exercise their rights and access government services. Donors, governments, and multilateral bodies should examine initiatives like these and explore collaborative or complementary opportunities for increasing sustainable funding for legal empowerment programs.

Efforts must also be made to build and strengthen networks of legal empowerment organizations working on GBV and gender justice at the national, regional, and global level. This study has proven deeply valuable for the research participants, who were able to strengthen relationships, provide mutual support and solidarity across borders, compare policy responses, and share ideas on how to work during this period. There is a clear opportunity to deepen and expand this initial intervention, to build a greater agenda for learning and collective action over the coming decade.

<sup>49</sup>The 2021 Generation Equality Forum is a timely global inflection point for gender equality. It “bring[s] together governments, corporations and change makers from around the world to define and announce ambitious investments and policies.” This is an opportunity for global leaders to stand with legal empowerment organizations tackling GBV. Generation Equality Forum, ‘Accelerating Progress for Gender Equality by 2030’, 2021, <https://forum.generationequality.org/>.

<sup>50</sup>Mott Foundation, ‘Fund For Global Human Rights, Grassroots Legal Empowerment Fund’, 2021 <https://bit.ly/3bnhqCq>.



# CONCLUSION

This research, which focused on how public institutions and grassroots legal empowerment groups addressed DV and IPV during the COVID-19 pandemic, serves as an entry point for further study into strengthening responses to GBV and advancing gender justice more broadly. More research is needed on the specific experiences of survivors during the pandemic, especially as they interface with customary justice systems and community leadership structures. Opportunities for bolstering multi-sectoral responses at the community level merit more attention, as do the potential impacts of linking national mechanisms to frontline services.

For the participants of this research project, our collective effort demonstrated the value of making real-time information available to grassroots actors. Our research project took place over five short months, while the pandemic was still at its height in many countries - including ones where many participants resided. Taking a moment to reflect on our experiences, and compare the strategies that helped our organizations to endure, will help us to adjust our approaches and envision new directions as we enter the second year of the pandemic.

We hope the perspectives of research participants prove useful to the range of actors responsible for the prevention and care of GBV survivors, across both government and civil society. Ultimately, these findings aim to contribute to a broader learning agenda for our network and the greater legal empowerment field - one that continues to generate real-time lessons capable of strengthening efforts to defend rights, shift power imbalances, and drive systemic change across our societies.

## RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

**Association for Emancipation, Solidarity and Equality of Women (North Macedonia)** is a civil society organization founded in 1994 and based in Skopje, Northern Macedonia. ESE works locally, nationally, and regionally across Central and Southeast Europe in cooperation with civil society partners. The organization works to improve the implementation of the social and economic rights of vulnerable groups of citizens by strengthening them, mobilizing, and engaging in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of public policies and services; ensuring equal access to justice and promoting fiscal transparency of institutions in the area of social and economic rights.

**Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (Bangladesh)** is one of the leading legal services organizations in Bangladesh, and the only one that provides access to legal aid across the spectrum, from the frontlines of the informal justice system to the apex of the courts. It prioritizes support to women, men and children living in poverty or facing disadvantage or discrimination. It also provides legal aid, advice and representation across a range of areas, including civil, criminal, family, labor, and land law, as well as on constitutional rights and remedies, providing access to judicial remedies alongside alternative dispute resolution wherever appropriate. Alongside individual legal aid, BLAST undertakes strategic litigation, or public interest litigation, as a key part of its advocacy for law and policy reforms to ensure effective legal protection of rights.

**EQUIS Justice for Women (Mexico)** is a feminist organization that since 2011 seeks to transform institutions, laws, and public policies to improve access to justice for all women. The organization works for comprehensive justice that takes into account the intersections between gender and other categories such as: race, ethnicity, class, disability, immigration status, gender-gender identity, and sexual preference, among others. Its approach goes beyond the use of criminal law and seeks to look at structural causes, working directly with governmental and judicial institutions to offer proposals based on research and solid evidence, and through alliances with civil society organizations we seek to strengthen citizen auditing.

**FIDA Cameroon**, a non-profit organization that was established in 1993 as a branch of the Federación Internacional De Abogadas (FIDA), which was established in Mexico in 1944. The organization's mission is to assist women and girls in accessing justice through training, advocacy, education, counseling, and conflict resolution.

**FIDA Nigeria** is a non-profit and non-political organization that was established in 1964 as a branch of the Federación Internacional De Abogadas (FIDA), formally established in Mexico in 1944. The organization's mission is to protect, promote, and preserve the rights of women and children in Nigeria by using the legal framework to ensure that they live free from all forms of discrimination, violence, and abuse in society.

**FIDA Uganda** is a non-profit organization that was established in 1974 as a branch of the Federación Internacional De Abogadas (FIDA), which was established in Mexico in 1944. FIDA Uganda's three main objectives are: 1) To enable women in Uganda to access quality and affordable legal services as a means to achieve human rights, gender equality, and sustainable development; 2) To promote social accountability, rule of law, and gender responsive governance at local, national, and regional level and 3) To promote accountability for the enactment and implementation of legal and policy frameworks for women's social economic justice. FIDA Uganda's approach to promoting gender equality is to tackle systemic and structural issues that promote inequality, improve legal protection for women, and support redress for human rights violations.

**Fundación Construir (Bolivia)** is a non-profit Bolivian civil society organization that develops research, education, communication, deliberation, monitoring and social advocacy activities, in order to help coordinate and promote actions and strategies that generate citizen participation processes to strengthen access to justice and democratic, social and economic development with gender equality.

**Fundación Markani (Argentina)** is civil society organization with the vision of promoting the active participation of people through the full exercise of human rights, promoting the integration of violated or vulnerable communities, generating awareness of the importance of building a peaceful, inclusive society with a gender perspective influencing substantively in public policies, and contributing to the movement for global justice. The organization's mission is to promote legal empowerment, especially of women from indigenous and Creole towns in rural communities, who are exposed to different violations, generating processes that lead to gender equity and equal rights. Its work focuses on promoting the use of complementary strategies between the current legal framework and the customs of resolution in indigenous community conflicts in order to ensure real and concrete access to their rights. Markani Foundation promotes knowledge and access to rights through the training of intercultural territorial legal promoters and intersectional groups with a gender and human rights perspective, valuing their community's social profile.

The **Gender Alternatives Foundation (Bulgaria)** is a non-profit organization, established in 2011, based in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. Its mission is to work towards promotion, protection, and empowerment of women and girls in all spheres of public and private life so that they realize their potential in a just and unbiased society. Their guiding principle is to address a number of structural inequalities which are layered in social organization and mindsets, and present the building blocks of gender-based violence and discrimination. The main objectives of GAF are supporting women and girls in socially vulnerable contexts; promoting and protecting the Universal and European standards for human rights; raising public awareness and understanding on gender-based violence and discrimination; and networking, mutual learning and dissemination of good practices.

The **Human Rights in Democracy Center (Albania)** is a non-governmental, non-partisan and non-profit organization aiming to work for the respect, protection, and fulfilment of human rights in Albania, and awareness of the Albanian society on the rule of law and human rights, with particular focus on vulnerable groups of society, such as women, girls, children, and minorities. Its mission is to protect and promote human rights as an independent actor in the civil society sector in Albania.

**Lawyers Against Abuse (South Africa)** is a not-for-profit organization that was established in 2011 in order to respond to the crisis of exceptionally high rates of GBV within the context of a broken justice system, which leave victims of GBV vulnerable to further abuse. The organization's mission is to provide holistic legal and psychosocial support to victims of gender-based violence and to facilitate structural change through strategic engagement with state actors and the communities in which they serve. The organization offers legal and psychosocial support and counselling; empowers communities through workshops and campaigns; and promotes strategic change by engaging local state actors, CSOs, and other stakeholders.

**Foundation of Local Democracy (Bosnia and Herzegovina)** is a local non-governmental organization based in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina with 24 years of experience in designing, coordinating, managing, and providing technical and personnel support for various projects and programs. The mission of the FLD is to create a society of equal opportunities, contributing to the development of civil society and promoting human rights. Since 2000, a big focus of FLD has been in the area of protection, promotion, and enhancement of human rights, especially the rights of victims of gender-based violence (domestic violence, sexual violence, and victims of the Yugoslav 1992-1995 war), with systematic resolution of their rights and support with the provision of durable solutions for the most vulnerable groups.

**Geledés - Instituto da Mulher Negra (Brazil)** is a civil society organization established in 1988 that stands in defense of women and blacks because it understands that these two social segments suffer from disadvantages and discrimination in access to social opportunities due to the racism and sexism in force in Brazilian society. Through education, communication, human rights promotion and monitoring, and measuring impact on public policies, Geledés aims to build a world based on liberty and equality. On gender issues, its main program is the capacity building of women's community paralegals.

**My Choices Foundation (India)** is a Hyderabad-based NGO dedicated to ending violence, abuse, and exploitation against women and girls in India. We address two of the most prevalent and intractable forms of abuse - domestic violence and trafficking of young girls for sexual exploitation. We are currently active in 8 states in India: West Bengal, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Bihar.

**SALIGAN (Philippines)** is a non-governmental organization focused on legal work for marginalized people. The organization has operations throughout the Philippines with offices in Metro Manila, the Bicol region, and Mindanao. They work mostly through legal empowerment and legal representation. SALIGAN seeks to “effect social change by working with women, the basic sectors, and local communities for their empowerment through the creative use of law and legal resources.”

**THEMIS - Gender, Justice and Human Rights (Brazil)** is a feminist and anti-racist organization committed to achieving justice and human rights for women. Established in 1993, THEMIS works to protect against gender discrimination and prevent violence at the intersections of class, ethnic, and racial inequalities through three main programs: Legal Empowerment, for community-based programs with women paralegals and capacity building in rights for domestic workers; Legal Advocacy, to promote dialogues with members of the Judiciary through public debates, lectures, and conferences; and Technology and Justice, for exploring and developing innovative new tools through the democratic use of digital technologies for women.

**This Life Cambodia (Cambodia)** is a leading community development NGO operating out of Siem Reap, Cambodia. We work with communities to identify their own priorities, putting into place the solutions they design, and making progress in the direction they choose. We don't build new schools or establishments, we work to galvanize existing community institutions, resources and infrastructure which can thrive long after we are gone. We help people to build the skills with which to take ownership of the projects. The communities lead the way, with us by their side, and then when the initiatives reach a point where they can be independently sustained, we hand the activities over to local authorities.

**Women's Justice Initiative (Guatemala)** is a Guatemala-based organization dedicated to combating gender inequality and ending violence against indigenous girls and women in rural communities through education, access to legal services, and gender-based violence prevention. Since 2011, WJI has worked at the individual, family, community, and municipal levels to prevent VAWG and to improve access to justice, implementing a rights-based legal empowerment methodology that allows indigenous women to know, use, and shape the law. Through community-based solutions that bolster national efforts to address gender-based violence, WJI transforms the norms and attitudes that view VAWG as acceptable.

**Women Safe House Sustenance Initiative (Nigeria)** is a non-profit organization that was established in 2016 which provides shelters, healthcare, financial sustenance, and legal services for women and girls facing gender-based violence that are economically disadvantaged. Through an approach focused on "comprehensive crisis services for survivors," the organization's mission is to protect and rehabilitate women and girls from all forms of gender-based violence in Nigeria.

