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Tackling Kenya's Domestic Violence Amid COVID-19 Crisis

Lockdown Measures Increase Risks for Women and Girls

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Kenyans make their way home before the daily dusk-to-dawn curfew in Nairobi, Kenya, April 6, 2020. © 2020 AP Photo/Brian Inganga

For 4 days, Juliet M., a 16-year-old Kenyan, was held captive by a man and sexually assaulted. She was rescued by neighbors and is now being cared for in a safe house in Nairobi. The attacker reportedly said he kidnapped her because he needed female company to get through the government-imposed COVID-19 lockdown.

The Kenya government has adopted strict measures to counter the spread of the COVID-19 virus. But these measures, as necessary as they are, are having particular impact on women and girls, including

elevating the risk of gender-based violence. Last week, [the National Council on Administration of Justice reported “a significant spike in sexual offences](#) in many parts of the country in the past two weeks.” They noted that “in some cases, the perpetrators are close relatives, guardians and/or persons living with the victims.” The report pledged that “the courts will consider giving directions on early hearing dates in such cases.”

Violence is a daily reality for women and girls across Kenya. According to [government data](#), 45 percent of women and girls aged 15 to 49 have experienced physical violence and 14 percent have experienced sexual violence. Many cases are not reported to authorities and few women get justice or receive medical care.

The restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to make it harder for survivors to report abuse and seek help and for service providers to respond efficiently. Sexual and other forms of violence against women have devastating consequences including injuries and serious physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health problems, including sexually transmitted infections, HIV, and unplanned pregnancies.

The Kenya government should urgently protect women and girls against violence during this crisis. Its public awareness campaigns should highlight this risk and give detailed information on how victims, including those infected with COVID-19, can access services. It should treat services for women who experience violence as essential, ensure these services have the resources they need, and make alternative accommodation available when the current limited shelters are full. Violence against women and girls is a crime, and they have a right to be protected even when the government is preoccupied with a pandemic.

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