

# Our Voices:

## Impact of COVID-19 on women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights in Eastern and Southern Africa

Transcript of a presentation about the project by Joyce Ouma

<https://vimeo.com/477243705/0aebd3dc24>

Salamander Trust,  
International Treatment Preparedness Campaign (ITPC),  
Making Waves



### Transcript of a presentation about research on the impact of Covid-19 on women and girls, HIV and sexual and reproductive health and rights in East and Southern Africa

In August-September 2020, with support from ITPC, Salamander Trust and Making Waves consulted with 30 women in 10 counties in Southern and East Africa. Ten interviews took place virtually with women leading community efforts to address HIV and SRHR in Botswana, Eswatini, Kenya, Namibia, Tanzania, South Africa, South Sudan, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Four of these women then conducted in-person or phone interviews with a further twenty women living with HIV - five each from Uganda, Zimbabwe, Kenya and South Sudan - in acknowledgment that the digital divide excludes many women.

The women involved are living with HIV or working with women and girls living with HIV. They range in age from 17 to 54, and live in urban, rural or peri-urban areas. They include adolescents living with HIV, young women, pregnant women, mothers married and single, women living with disabilities and co-morbidities, women who are engaged in sex work, women who use drugs, LGBTQI+ women and women who experience racism. Some have had COVID-19. Many of them have stepped up their activities to promote gender equality and SRHR throughout the pandemic, often at considerable personal cost.

Their experiences illustrate that there will be no ethical, effective, sustainable response to COVID-19 without women being at the centre of decision-making around their SRHR.



We are pleased to share here the **transcript of a presentation by Joyce Ouma, one of the researchers on the project**. You can [watch the presentation here](#).

## Joyce Ouma, Kenya

Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to present on whether or not we are following the WHO Consolidated Guideline on the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women living with HIV. Quick answer – I'm afraid we are not.

This presentation is informed by two phases of research conducted by the Making Waves network and Salamander Trust in coordination and with support from ITPC.

This research took a two phase approach. The first phase was done specifically for presentation at the CROI and the findings were given in March 2020. This first phase involved 198 women from 28 countries, and partner agencies like ICW East Africa and Africaid. The women were engaged through a survey, interviews and focus group discussions.

The second phase of the research was prompted by the findings of the first research, and took place between August and October 2020 and involved 30 women from 10 countries in East and Southern Africa which as we know is a high HIV prevalence area.

Though it was a smaller sample, it was to follow up on the first research that had very many findings on what women and girls across the global were going through.

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From the first phase of research, there were very many women engaged, and one was asked, who supports you? The response was quite heart-breaking – she said no-one supports us, we are supported by our passion.

The women consulted also pointed out that they have repeatedly made the recommendations listed, over decades, in many successive documents produced by women living with HIV. I have been in the HIV advocacy field for nearly five years, and for these five years I have seen women living with HIV, through various institutions, make almost the same recommendations over and over again, and still nothing much is being done.

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The second phase of research was prompted by the findings of the first research. This phase involved 30 women from 10 countries in East and Southern Africa. One of them mentioned COVID-19 as a big black dog. Covid-19 has just made an already bad situation



worse. Adolescent girls and young women were not accessing services before Covid-19, they most definitely are not doing so right now, and Covid-19 has only aggravated the situation. Women were exposed to violence before Covid-19. Young women were not getting information, commodities, or even services before Covid-19. But because Covid-19 is here, we have found the big black dog to put the blame on.

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Among the key issues mentioned by the women and girls who took part in the second phase of the research was violence. Violence during this Covid-19 has been reported in the form of defilement cases, an increase in intimate partner violence, and during this period access to justice has been denied. The police are telling people to stay home to limit the spread of Covid-19. In this regard the situation has worsened with regard to gender based violence, and women and girls are on the receiving end.

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The other key issue mentioned by respondents on the issues they are facing during the Covid-19 period was the issue of contraception. Access to contraception during this period has been very limited. Access to transport was not very possible during the lockdowns going on in several countries in reaction to Covid-19. Contraception was not being treated as a priority, because Covid-19 was the new kid on the block and everybody was afraid of transmitting Covid-19 rather than also taking care of our issues that are very key, with contraception being one of the key issues that we are facing and that we need to access during this period. So you may find that if someone wanted to use a condom, they cannot access it because of the several barriers I have mentioned, so they cannot use it at all.

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Another key issue mentioned is that Covid-19 has highlighted attitudes of funders that really, really need to change. You find that during this period funders do still have stringent conditions that grassroots organisations like ours cannot reach and it is not fair. These grassroots organisations are the ones who can be able to reach major areas of the community that funders are not able to reach. This has posed a great barrier to continuing the essential work that these women and girls organisations do at the community level. The Covid-19 period has seen very many innovative measures that have been improved or improvised to react to the Covid-19 situation, but with not enough funding the women and girls organisations are not able to be innovative in their own way, without having any money in their kitties.

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This thought-provoking slide is a picture that shows a lot of circling sharks – HPV, early child marriages, HIV, teenage pregnancies. As you can see beneath the ocean are the SRHR violations, IPV, and other violence against women and girls. It is just an illustration of how hard it is for us as women and girls to survive in an increasingly toxic environment or an increasingly toxic ocean of violence against women and girls and very many sexual and reproductive health and rights violations. We as women and girls sometimes feel that being in that empty boat is what our lives feel like. Everyone else is trying to address the many circling sharks – the HPV, early child marriages, the HIV, the teenage pregnancies - that they can see above the surface. But no-one is looking beneath the surface. There are very many issues beneath the surface and these key issues are major violations for us as girls and women. Without these invisible foes being addressed, we may not be able to take care of the circling sharks that are constantly tormenting the lives of girls and women. What's also interesting is that many donors or funders are focusing on the circling sharks, but they focus on them individually instead of integrating their efforts so as to make the environment less toxic for us as girls and women.

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This is my final slide. The UN Secretary General's quote reiterates what I have been mentioning throughout this presentation and what women and girls have been saying throughout this pandemic. That Covid-19 has just revealed the fractures in our society. These fractures have been existent for a very long time, but we just turned a blind eye to it.

This slide contains our call to action. They may not sound new, because we have repeated them time and time again. We even sound like a broken record, but we keep mentioning them with the hope that someone may listen and someone may pick it up and move with it, and finally address the issues that women and girls have been raising. As you can see from the slide, these are some of the issues that girls and women have been going through during this period and it's a call to action to donors, NGOs and governments, and everybody else who is involved in the HIV response.

While one may argue that Covid-19 has affected everyone all the same, it is not entirely true. It is us women and girls who have endured intimate partner violence, it is us who are constantly trying to negotiate condom use, trying to avoid unintended pregnancies, it is us whose health choices lie in the hands of our sexual partners, it is us women and girls who have had to endure chronic gender inequalities over time. And just like everything else, Covid-19 has made these inequalities unbearable for us.

There is more that I would like to mention. There have been issues that women and girls have been undergoing since time immemorial. I would urge you to read the documents and links that are attached to this presentation.

Thank you.



## Acknowledgements

### Videos:

- Kenya, Joyce Amondi Ouma
- South Sudan: Ade Nunu Diana Alison
- Uganda: Jacquelyne Alesi
- Zimbabwe: Martha Tholanah

### Virtual interviews:

- Botswana: Boingotlo Gupta
- Eswatini: Precious Shongwe
- Kenya: Joyce Amondi Ouma
- Kenya: Phelister Abdalla
- Namibia: Makena Henguva
- South Africa: Nomfundo Lorraine Eland
- South Sudan: Ade Nunu Diana Alison
- Uganda: Jacquelyne Alesi
- Zambia: Mwenya Chiti

Virtual interviewers: Martha Tholanah, Emma Bell, Fiona Hale

### National interviews:

Kenya National interviewer: Joyce Amondi Ouma. Interviewees: Delma Chiheny, Idah Perez, Gladys Asinyen, and anonymous contributors

South Sudan National interviewer: Ade Nunu Diana Alison. Interviewees: anonymous contributors

Uganda National interviewer: Jacquelyne Alesi. Interviewees: Gladys Nanbayo, Nagujja Olivia, and anonymous contributors

Zimbabwe National interviewer: Martha Tholanah. Interviewees: Mercy Musiyiwa, Janet Tatenda Bhila, Angela Jambo, Nandi D. Chinowawa, Mary Audry Chard

Project documentation by Salamander Trust Associates and Making Waves members, with contributions, comments and review by the women listed above. Images by Jane Shepherd. Oversight by Wame Jallow, Helen Etya'ale and Gerard Best of ITPC, and Alice Welbourn of Salamander Trust

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For further information, see <https://tinyurl.com/SalTCOVIDfx>

