



The SEMA Global Network speaks out about coronavirus

With each passing day, members of SEMA, the Global Network for Victims and Survivors to End Wartime Sexual Violence, grow more concerned about COVID-19's impact on their communities, survivors, and on those most at risk. Coming from 21 countries, SEMA members face limited public health infrastructure and unavailable hygiene resources, especially in remote or post-conflict areas. SEMA members, including Grace (Uganda) and Mildred (Zimbabwe), report that measures to slow the spread of the coronavirus are already leading to skyrocketing food prices and a real risk of widespread hunger. SEMA members all agree: though this pandemic greatly affects everyone, its consequences will be disproportionately felt by vulnerable populations around the globe.

While essential, public health measures, such as closing public spaces and limiting movement, add to the existing care-giving duties of women. Women often employed part-time or informally, are now home, with a sudden loss of the income which has supported them and their families. As it has occurred following previous outbreaks, women also fear greater difficulty than men to return to their pre-outbreak levels of employment.

While SEMA members, such as Suzy (South Sudan) and Asmaou (Guinea), promote COVID-19 awareness and health guidelines aligned with WHO, they are very concerned about sufficient access to basic resources and reliable information during this unprecedented pandemic, especially in isolated areas, as rightly pointed out by Bernadette (CAR), Rosario (Guatemala) and other members. SEMA members are particularly concerned for all survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. Survivors will experience the same pandemic as others, but often in precarious living conditions, whether shunned due to stigma, as refugees in cramped, unsanitary camps, internally displaced or in exile, and with compromised immunity due to injury or disease, as they recover from the severe physical and emotional trauma they have already experienced.

Fulvia (Colombia), Feride (Kosovo), and Esperande (Burundi), and other SEMA members strongly question how communities intend to manage the expected increase in violence against women and girls linked to the confinement conditions and great uncertainty, given the decrease in options for women trying to flee such violence. Because of the greater range of risks to survivors and their communities the world over, SEMA members recommend the following to policymakers and community leaders:

PROTECT by ensuring shelters remain accessible for women and girls fleeing violence, with a procedure to admit those with COVID-19

SUPPORT by ensuring everyone, regardless of mobility or position in society, can access basic needs, including food and water

ENGAGE by ensuring that women actively participate in decision-making regarding COVID-19 planning

SEMA members strongly urge decision-makers to recognise and prioritise the specific needs of survivors in all community responses and planning, as these higher-risk individuals will be massively affected. They believe addressing these needs in a timely manner will diminish long-term costly impacts and devastating suffering for all.

SEMA members respect the internationally recommended health measures in place, but strongly believe this global problem requires a globally coordinated global solution, with shared best practices and innovations, and that **the time for real solidarity is now.**