




# **RAPID ASSESSMENT OF SEXUAL & GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

April 2021





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Our vision is to see a well-informed and active Ghanaian citizenry able to contribute to transformational change that advances democracy, accountability and social inclusion.

We want to increase the effectiveness of citizens and civil society to achieve an equitable, inclusive society by convening inclusive dialogue and collaboration; catalysing active citizenship and collective action; coordinating and supporting strategic partnerships, and facilitating continuous learning to fuel wider scale change.

Our ultimate goal is to ensure all citizens, regardless of gender, disability, age or location, are empowered to participate in decisions and raise concerns. We will continue to support a vibrant civil society to engage constructively with the government and drive forward a transformative development agenda that will leave nobody behind.

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# Acronyms

AAG	ActionAid Ghana
ADHD	Attentive Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AEW	Africa Education Watch
APRA	Agricultural and Policy Research in Africa
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BECE	Basic Education Certificate Examination
BPfA	Beijing Platform for Action
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSE	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
COVID-19	Novel Coronavirus
DOVVSU	Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GES	Ghana Education Service
GHS	Ghana Health Services
GSAA	Ghana Sociological and Anthropological Association
GNECC	Ghana National Education & Campaign Coalition
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisations
JHS	Junior High School
KATH	Komfo Anokye Teaching hospital
MoGCSP	Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection
NBSSI	National Board for Small Scale Institution
NCCE	National Commission for Civic Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PTA	Parents Teachers Association
SACAP	South African College of Applied Psychology
S&GBV	Sexual & Gender-Based Violence
SHS	Senior High School
SWIDA	Savannah Women's Integrated Development Association Gh
TUC-Ghana	Trades Union Congress- Ghana
UN	United Nations
UNDHR	United Nations Declaration on Human Rights
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
WILDAF	Women in Law and Development in Africa
WHO	World Health Organisation
WASSCE	West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination







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# Executive Summary

The rapid assessment study was commissioned to explore and assess the impact of COVID-19 on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) against aged women (through witchcraft accusations), adolescent girls and cyber bullying. This evidence will essentially inform further work on protecting women and girls during pandemics. This task was executed by addressing the following specific objectives:

- i. Highlight the prevalence of violence against women accused of witchcraft and sexual based violence against adolescent school girls during the COVID-19 pandemic
- ii. Identify the root causes of gender-based violence linking it to how the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to its perpetuation.
- iii. Identify what response mechanisms are in place and the interest groups providing support services during the pandemic to victims.
- iii. Identify recommendations to strengthen the response mechanisms and ongoing interventions on prevention and response to sexual abuse and gender-based violence.

The rapid assessment was a done through desk reviews of existing documents, use of in-depth and key informant interviews and matters arising from dialogues convened by the Star Ghana Foundation in Tamale and Accra to share the preliminary findings. Participants at the stakeholder consultations were drawn from the education sector, Government institutions (Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit, Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, National Commission for Civic Education) and experts working on the SGBV in Civil Society Organizations and Non-governmental organizations. Key informants included victims of sexual abuse, pregnant teens, a guardian to a pregnant teen and some development workers working on the issues.





Key findings include:

#### **Economic**

- The economic devastation as a result of the pandemic is hitting hard and becoming a major driver of sexual and gender-based violence due to job losses, unemployment, loss of capital etc.
- Rising poverty among citizens due to the economic devastations from COVID-19 pandemic
- Funding diversion to COVID-19 response by development partners
- Reduction in philanthropism

#### **Social**

The country risks facing another “shadow pandemic” if schools continue to be closed without responsive measures with the increasing number in teenage pregnancies which currently stands at Four Thousand, Four Hundred and Forty-One (4,441) in the Volta, Savannah, Northern, North East, Central, Krachi West in the Oti Region, Upper East, Jirapa Municipality in Upper West.


- The restriction on movements during the partial lockdown also meant that victims of abuse were stuck with their abusers.
- Closures of schools
- New forms of employment
- Lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services
- Lack of sex education
- Increased in time spent on-line and internet users

#### **Gaps in existing Legislations & policies**

- Concerted efforts aimed at addressing issues of legislations, policy and awareness raising in protecting the vulnerable is needed.
- Government needs to integrate gender responsive strategies aimed at addressing SGBV in its COVID-19 containment and recovery measures.
- The re-entry policy guideline of the Ghana Education Service to support teen mothers and pregnant teens is challenged by the rigid conditions of compulsory completion of 3 years of the free SHS and the lack of early child care centres to support the re-integration of teen mothers’

#### **Religious**

- Religion and culture are drivers in the increase in Witchcraft accusations and cyber bullying.
- Increased in time spent on religious activities through consultations and reporting of cases for interventions.



Based on the key findings, the following recommendations are raised to address SGBV related work during this period of the pandemic for STAR Ghana Foundation and partners:

#### **Enactment of legislation & policy**

- A robust gender sensitive national sexual harassment policy especially targeted at schools as requested by the Domestic Violence coalition in 2019 as government prepares to re-open schools.
- Influence the passage of the Anti-Witchcraft Bill into law to inhibit a continuation of all forms of harmful cultural and religious practices against women and girls as this pandemic has no cure in sight.
- Provision of childcare facilities; (space, caregivers) and customized classroom furniture to accommodate the changes in physical appearance of Pregnant School Girls; (Biritwum et al, 2015) when school re-opens during the pandemic.

#### **Sensitization & education**

- Coordination of activities and work of significant state institutions like DOVVSU, Social Welfare, Ghana Medical Association, NCCE etc. to harmonize responses to victims of S&GBV during the pandemic
- Introduction of Sexual and Reproductive Health Education in schools to combat negative constructions of femininity and masculinity in addressing the impact of COVID-19 on S&GBV against girls

#### **Advocacy, lobbying & campaign**

- Invoke existing legal frameworks to support and sanction child right abuse and perpetrators (e.g. defilement, rape, lynching of alleged witches, incest, sexual exploitation etc.) in this of the pandemic
- "Long term development planning to tackle widespread poverty in Ghana with short term measures to extend existing social intervention to areas with high teen/school pregnancy rate (e.g. Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty, Mandatory registration of all pupils in Basic Schools on the National Health Insurance Scheme)" (Biritwum et al, 2015).
- Operationalization of the DV fund to support institutions mandated to provide support to victims functional, including shelters to accommodate and serve as safe havens for victims of S&GBV as a means of supporting vulnerable people during the pandemic.





# Introduction

Gender-Based violence is any harm perpetuated against a person resulting from unequal power relations and influenced and determined by gendered social roles and norms for men and women. According to the UNHCR (n.d.), GBV can include sexual, physical, mental and economic harm inflicted in public or in private, threats of violence, harmful cultural or religious practices, coercion and manipulation. SGBV may take many forms such as rape, witchcraft accusations, defilement, sexual exploitation, intimate partner violence, sexual violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation amongst many others.

The World Health Organization (n.d.) reports that, cases of sexual and other forms of GBV increases in situations of “complex emergencies” with COVID-19 as no exception. Governments and other UN agencies have since put measures in place to strengthen their health sectors responses in addressing cases of SGBV as part of a comprehensive approach in preventing it as a health and human rights concern.

The passage of a Domestic Violence Act 2007 (732) and a Domestic Violence Legislative Instrument 2016 (LI 2237) has not effectively addressed issues of domestic violence because implementation and coordination on same has been weak. Ghana’s Government, according to the DV coalition, has not demonstrated enough political willingness and commitment towards putting in place pragmatic and sustainable measures to promote women and girls’ rights against SGBV prior to the pandemic (graphic.com.gh, 2019). This is because of the non-operationalization of the DV fund, inadequate shelters and the inadequate resources available to institutions to respond to cases.

This rapid assessment aims at identifying the impacts of COVID-19 on SGBV with focus on witchcraft accusations, cyber bullying, sexual abuse and violence against girls. It also examines the preventive and response measures and raises recommendations for policy advocacy.



# Background/Situational Analysis

## COVID-19 AND SGBV


Since emerging in 2019, the novel corona virus has spread rapidly (Singh et al, 2020) and Ghana recorded its first imported cases in March 2020 with an immediate call by government for the closures of schools. After its emergence, WHO declared the disease a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, few days before the government of Ghana instituted the partial lockdown, a ban on social gathering and religious activities and the social distancing measure as part of its interventions and containment measures.

COVID-19 is “reinforcing existing inequalities” (George-Betz, 2020) amongst rich and poor, women and men, girls and boys, people with disabilities and those with diverse sexual and gender identities. The disproportionate impacts on men and women seen during the COVID-19 pandemic are rooted in structural barriers, unequal power relations, patriarchal and social norms, negative attitudes, stigma, and discrimination (Hutt, 2020).

The pandemic has led to the suspension of most economic activities, devastating people’s means of livelihood, halting education with the closure of schools and access to health care. In Ghana, the TUC-Ghana estimates about half a million job losses in the formal and informal sectors (Apinga, 2020) leading to economic stressors which are a threat to violence with women at more risk. According to World Vision International (2020) COVID-19 has disrupted the provision of vital services while “putting millions of lives at risk with nationwide school closures in 194 countries, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners – over 90 per cent of the world’s school-going population” (Tseganu, 2020).

In containing COVID-19, containment measures by the government of Ghana through its response and recovery mechanisms have been adhoc and do not seek to tackle structural and systemic barriers that disadvantage women and girls around S&GBV. These mechanisms including the closures of school, institution of a 3-weeks partial lockdown, rationing and the running of shift systems in the markets did not have provisions for protecting victims of SGBV as well as “integrate a gender lens” (UNDP, 2020). Even though the MoGCSP in partnership with the UNFPA provided hotlines for victims of abuse to report cases, shelters were unavailable to victims.






In Ghana, the Ministry of Education and some private educational institutions have put in place strategies to ensure continuity of education through distance online learning delivered through radio, television and the Internet. However, these strategies have further widened the inequality gap, as learners from poor, vulnerable, and marginalized households are unable to benefit from continued learning through these platforms due to lack of access to gadgets, electricity and internet according to Kofi Asare, Executive Director of Africa Education Watch.

Prior to the pandemic, the education of girls was at risk of child marriages, challenges related to access due to several factors including poverty, superstition around menstruation, lack of sanitary pads and “risk of teenage pregnancy” according to the African Education Watch (GNA, 2020). Teenage pregnancy is a major hindrance to the development of girls. According to Mr. Kofi Asare, the Executive Director of AEW, a research conducted after tracking the number of girls enrolled in Kindergarten in 2009 shows a worrying development. This is because there was a high reduction in the numbers of girls from 720000 to only 500 who wrote the BECE in 2020 he said. The closure of schools has further heightened these challenges making especially girls more vulnerable and exposed due to the several reported cases of teenage pregnancy.

While the UN (2020) estimated during the lockdowns that nearly “11.1 million primary and secondary school learners worldwide – 5.2 million of whom are girls – are at risk” of not returning to school following school closures due to COVID-19, the World Vision reported that “258 million children and youth of primary and secondary school age were already failing to access education”.

In a related development with families stuck at home, UN women declared SGBV a “shadow pandemic” with especially women and girls being more at risk of being abused through assault, intimate partner violence. Evidently, the UN Secretary-General in his 2020 report asserted that; “accompanying the crisis has been a spike in domestic violence reporting, at exactly the time that services, including rule of law, health and shelters, are being diverted to address the pandemic”.



The concept of witchcraft is deeply rooted in many African countries and communities since time immemorial and Ghana is no exception. The concept is a harmful cultural practice which has shaped the Ghanaian culture and tradition in many ways and continues to be a means through which violence is and can be perpetuated against especially vulnerable groups like women and girls. While perceptions and attitudes vary across Africa and communities, witchcraft has different dimensions and connotations ascribed to victims within the African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam.

In Islam, even though witchcraft is not the only issue that can be associated with violence against victims, the belief in the “JINN” spirit or “Aljanae” (in the local Hausa language) being responsible for such acts against a person or possessing a person may lead to a person inflicted with some physical or emotional punishment. Until today, these beliefs still influence actions and behavior through accusations and suspicions of witchcraft. These have been the foundations based on which several women who are majority victims have suffered some forms of GBV.

Through years of work and research by ActionAid Ghana and SONGTABA, witchcraft has been noted to be associated with acts of injustices like mob and instant justice, discrimination, marginalization and the exploitation of women for free labor at the ‘Witch camps. In the face of the pandemic, Ghana was thrown into a state of disarray when 90-year old Akua Denteh was accused of witchcraft and lynched to death in Kafaba in the Savannah region.

This report analyses SGBV in this time of the pandemic, and highlights implications on sexual violence against girls, cyberbullying and witchcraft accusations. The report interrogates the prevalence, drivers and response measures.



# Methodology

The study methodology is purely descriptive. The methodology included a desk review of relevant documents and limited interviews with key stakeholders (i.e. Key Informant Interviews-KII) within the civil society spaces, some victims of teenage pregnancy and other relevant stakeholders during the stakeholder convening in Tamale and Accra.



# Objectives

This research aims at helping to address the evidence gaps, and contribute to generating evidence on the effects of COVID-19 on sexual and gender-based violence, looking particularly at witchcraft accusations and sexual violence against girls with teenage pregnancy and cyber bullying. Evidence from the research will support influencing policies on tailoring prevention and responsive efforts, pilot different actions to testing new and innovative approaches to engaging on this issue in the pandemic period.

The research objectives are:

- iv. Seek to highlight the prevalence of violence against women accused of witchcraft and sexual based violence against adolescent school girls.
- v. Discuss the root causes of gender-based violence linking it to how the covid-19 pandemic has contributed to its perpetuation.
- vi. Discuss what response mechanisms are in place and the interest groups providing support services.
- vii. Propose recommendations to strengthen the response mechanisms for effectiveness.





# Findings

## **Witchcraft Accusations and Associated Violence**

Witchcraft is mostly associated with women, the aged, poor and vulnerable due to their inability to respond to physical violence. A research by ActionAid Ghana (2012) found that, "witch camps are a cruel manifestation of gender inequality and violence against women in Ghana, as well as a denial of the rights of the women and girls who live there".


Witchcraft accusations and suspicions are determined during the process of performing widowhood rites for women, revelations by spiritual leaders, during consultations and deliverance sessions, loss of family members, when someone falls sick or when people seek healing. An AAG (2012) report found that; almost all "persons who feel unwell, searching for "healing" at the center are told their condition is caused by a family member, mostly women, who bewitched them".

Even though the practice and act constitute human rights abuse, there are no specific national laws in Ghana addressing it. Several years after Ghana signed onto Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, Beijing Platform for Action (CEDAW), the Maputo protocol and the UNDHR, women continue to face these injustices leading to their forceful eviction and banishment from their communities and society at large. In the 21st century, "witchcraft is not a simple remnant of an old religion, but an adaptive component of modern culture" (Brown, 2011).

In April 2020, five cases were recorded at Adulbilyili in the Savannah region involving three women and two men and nine cases reported in June 2020 in the Nanumba district. In another development in July 2020, the lynching of 90-year-old Akua Denteh in the Savannah region caused an international outrage after a local fetish priest accused her of being a "witch".

## **Prevalence**

Witchcraft is very prevalent in the northern sectors with a higher rate concentrated in the Northern region among 4 major tribes namely Kokombas, Dagombas, Bimobas and Mamprusis who are the majority in the 'witch camps' according to Lamnatu Adam, the Executive Director of Songtaba.



Until 2019, there were six 'witch camps' namely Gambaga, Kukuo, Gnani, Bonyase, Nabuli and Kpatinga located in remote areas of northern Ghana (ActionAid, 2012). Today, there are four 'witch camps' with three in the Northern region and one in the North East region serving as places of abode to accused and suspected witches. This was after the Bonyase and Nabuli camps closed in 2014 and 2019 respectively. While these camps might be closed to accommodation, they still operate for purification purposes and other activities at the shrines.

Quite recently, there is an emerging one in Leldabali in the Gushegu Municipality in the Northern region which is considered a safe haven for "women who have not been accused of witchcraft but see checking in there as a preventive measure" for their lives says Madam Lamnatu Adam. The conditions of women and children in the camps have worsened, due to COVID-19 and the containment measure like social distancing, closure of schools, closures of borders etc., as visits to the camps by philanthropists who support with basic materials and resources has reduced.

### **Causes**

The emergence of COVID-19 has heightened the situation on the accusations and suspicion of witchcraft in Ghana. This is because, even though areas with increased cases of accusations and allegations were not hotspots for the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore not affected by most of the responsive and containment mechanisms like partial lockdown, the ripple effect in other areas are affecting everyone devoid of location due to the loss of jobs and livelihoods.

While many citizens are on the verge of losing their jobs and livelihoods, they are seeking spiritual interventions from fetish priests or other clerics from the Christian and Islamic religions to avert these uncertainties. In the case involving Madam Akua Denteh, the youth alleged that, she was responsible for their inability to get jobs and to progress. Does this mean the pandemic is going to heighten these allegations further because of the looming crisis of threats of more job losses due to redundancies and layoffs and in other cases companies closing production?

The economic devastations and other impacts of the pandemic even though is more severe in some major cities like Accra and Kumasi, affects citizens in other parts of the country. This is because of how the value chain and supply chain is scattered across the country. Also, family members who are breadwinners or provides for families in rural areas and are affected by the economic downturns may push rural folks in seeking consultations on their behalf.



## **ECONOMIC/POVERTY**

Accusations and suspicions of witchcraft are mostly linked to the socio-economic standing of the accused even though majority of victims in urban areas might be of good economic standing. Gender inequality continues to be a major challenge to women in the northern sector where poverty levels are high due to unpaid care work. Thus, allegations and camps exist in the northern and North-East regions where poverty levels are higher than other areas in Ghana.


The emergence of the pandemic has heightened the poverty levels with the economic devastation, loss of jobs, migration and heightened suspicions against alleged witches. Even though the Northern regions did not witness the partial lockdown, activities from other parts of the country affected them since many lost customers, had lower demands in goods and services and the businesses of many others collapsed. It is worthy of note that; several farmers lost their produce due to the pandemic according to Hajia Alima, Executive Director of SWIDA-Gh.

Research by the Agricultural Policy Research in Africa found that there were 55.5% reductions in farming activities and 59.1% in business activities due to COVID-19. Also, about 50% of their respondents reported they “could not access off-farm work within their villages, while 64.6% could not do so outside their villages” (Hodney & Dzanku, 2020). All these are reasons that can brew suspicions against vulnerable members of a family. The threats of more economic devastation in our economy coupled with companies doing redundancies or lay-offs can propel an increase in allegations and suspicions especially for families of affected workers.

### **Gender relations of economic devastation**

Research and evidence available shows that, witchcraft is deep-rooted in economic inequalities that affect women because of inherent gender roles and unequal power relations that emanate from the male-dominated social and cultural structures (AAG, 2020). Research also shows that geographical settings, economic status, and social and cultural structures are factors reinforcing unbalanced allegations that contribute to more women standing accused.

Similarly, while according to some people the actual dagbanli name, which is ‘sonya’ for witch/wizard, is gender-neutral one wonders why the name ‘witch camps’ connotes femininity. Also, the ‘purification ceremonies to ascertain the innocence or guilt of the accused is performed by camp chiefs or male priests known as Tindanas (AAG, 2012).



In addition, the ActionAid report (2020) noted that the numbers of men in camps are far lower than the number of alleged females due to the imbalance in the vulnerability levels which also translates into accusations and proving their guilty or innocent status. Thus, exposing “a reflection of the patriarchal nature of Ghanaian society” (GSAA, 2020). In the case involving the alleged three witches and two wizards in Adulbilyili in 2020, while they were to be banished, the males refused to leave and were pardoned by the late chief of Nyankpala says Prince Imoro. Meanwhile, the three women were banished without any fair hearing or pardon.

The impact of COVID-19 on this has been more women accused of being responsible for their loss of livelihoods and that of others due to a lack of access to markets and the loss of economic livelihoods and opportunities of relatives in other cities. Similarly, with more women at the risk of job losses due to their reproductive roles, they become more vulnerable to accusations and indulging in consultations with priests and clerics.

### **Sexual abuse & labour exploitation of ‘escorts’**

When alleged witches are ostracized or banished from communities to camps, young girls are given by families to help them with their chores. These girls suffer several forms of violations against their rights including the right to decent living and in some instances the right to the free compulsory basic education as guaranteed by the 1992 constitution of Ghana. Subsequently, “this further strengthens the chain of poverty for the girls who do not get the opportunity of schooling” (AAG, 2012).

The nation-wide closure of schools has also affected the few girls who have access to education due to the exposure to sexual abuse and violence through sexual exploitation, rape and defilement which puts them at risk of teenage pregnancy. The labour of these innocent girls are also exploited in their quest to survive since there is a reduction in Philanthropic activities in the camps due to the closing of borders etc. Many other girls are exposed to the dangers and worst forms of child labour on farms.

### **Cuts in funding and aid**

In July, the UK government announced a cut of about £2.9bn in aid due to an economic downturn caused by the pandemic (BBC, 2020). The effect of this and many others from development partners has been a diversion of interventions to COVID-19 response and containment mechanisms like provision of sanitary, veronica buckets etc. this has led to a reduction in advocacy and campaigns directed at changing toxic narratives on witchcraft due to the lack of funding and aid.



## **SOCIAL/RELIGIOUS**


### **Traditional & Religious**

The role tradition and religion play in witchcraft accusations cannot be overemphasized. Thus, "Witchcraft accusations are thought of as mostly to do with traditional and 'backwards' beliefs, but they are an integral part of belief in religion. Most religions believe in good and evil" (AAG, 2012). Meanwhile, the common and rampant denominator is the traditional African religion.

In recent years, the religious dynamics of Christianity and Islam have changed the dynamics where the economic status of a woman does not really matter in standing accused. In Islam, the belief in Jinns (spiritual ghosts) or 'Aljanu'(dwarf) spirits possessing people is high. Through their powers of flying and invisibility, Jinns are the chief component in occult activities and Voodoo, Black magic, Poltergeists, Witchcraft (islamcan.com). It is believed that, Jinns possess women more because of their make-up – making women victims to accusations than their male counterparts. When possessed, victims are sent to a 'mallam' for the jinn to be driven/cast out of their bodies through beatings or loud recitations of some qur'anic verses in the ears. Thus, the believe that subjecting Jinns to beatings and torture is what will drive them away from the body through the shoulders, waist or chest.

For the Christian religion, several reports and televised services have shown consistent abuse of women and children labeled as witches in some churches. The difference between the traditional African and orthodox religious setting in dealing with accusations of witchcraft is the place and venue. Whiles the African traditional ones are mostly in the rural areas, the orthodox religious ones happen in urban areas and sometimes telecast in the media. Subsequently, while most victims in the traditional settings may consider the camps as safe havens, those accused and sent to churches or a mallam do not. Similarly, victims at the traditional 'witch camps' are being exploited of their labour to provide free unpaid and paid labour unlike those found in sanctuaries or a mallam's house.

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded issues relating to an increase in religious activities since many people were and are spending more time with families and getting to know their children during the partial lockdown, working from home arrangements and loss of jobs.



Others are devoting a lot more time after losing jobs and capital to religious activities like going to church, engaging in consultations with Fetish Priests and clerics, and sending their families for prayer and deliverance sessions. While many appreciated the time the pandemic gave them to spend with families, others attributed and interpreted the behaviors of family members to mean possessions of Jinns in some Muslim households. These led to the exposure of children and adults to the torturous ways of driving out Jinns which has become an income generating activities for some unscrupulous mallams according to a Sheikh in the Savannah region. The growing nature of these inhumane acts have been greatly influenced by the closures of school, loss of jobs or livelihoods of parents whose dependents may exhibit signs and symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

#### **Torture due to refusal to coercive confessions**

The use of force or coercion is a common way in getting victims to confess. To many, it is the best way to save themselves from being inflicted with more pain and torture through beatings, lynching or other forms of verbal or physical abuse. In June 2020, while there were 10 women involved in the Kafaba case, only Madam Akua Denteh who resisted coercive confession was lynched to the point of death. Madam Denteh's refusal to confess to any knowledge about the lack of jobs for the youth and to the poverty levels of the youth in her area heightened her existing vulnerabilities and exposure.


As the impact of this pandemic lingers on, the use of force on victims to forced confessions is going to be on the increase. On a similar note, victims sent to clerics are also at more risks of torture and punishment from clerics to confess to being responsible for the 'misfortunes' of relatives as a result of COVID-19.

### **HEALTH**

#### **Sickness or chronic disease**

In witchcraft accusations or suspicions, sickness and illness can be a reason someone wrongfully get condemned. This is caused by a focus on the 'why' as opposed to 'how' of one's sickness. "Women who are accused of witchcraft are often suffering from clinical depression, schizophrenia or dementia: "In traditional communities, there isn't an understanding of depression or schizophrenia" (AAG, 2012).





Prince Imoro reveals that, at Dihli in the Savannah Region, Hepatitis B is linked to spiritual poisoning and blamed on witches with families refusing to seek medical attention. The continuous infections within families mark a sign of attacks that calls for spiritual cleansing. Similarly, according to him, the contraction of the COVID-19 virus can be attributed to witchcraft since the belief in such is higher during consultations than in science. According to Prince Imoro, it is easy for families to accuse older women of being responsible if their relatives contract the disease in the cities. The “symptoms of the virus even make it easier for these accusations to be valid” he



# Impacts

"When the belief system and accusations lead to people being persecuted and abused, it becomes problematic" (AAG, 2012). Evidently, victims of alleged witchcraft accusations and suspicions forever suffer some form of psychological or emotional abuse. The infliction of pains through beatings, lynching, assault, verbal abuse, violence and torture leave victims traumatized and with scars on their bodies for the rest of their lives especially in cases of forced confessions and casting away of demons or Jinns.

Residents of these 'witch camps' suffer alienation from their families and community members due to a disconnection from the relationships once they are accused and banished. In the case of Awabu shared by AAG on Facebook in November 2020, her accusation came after her sister-in-law took ill and she was sent packing from her brother's house. For the 'escorts' the treatment they endure from other community children may affect their socialization while growing up since they might play with them during the closure of school.

The negative impact of toxic gendered narratives about elderly women being witches and the increase in economic devastation characterized by job and livelihood losses is forcing most of them to opt to relocate to the 'witch camps' to avoid any form of violence. They also go through some form of trauma because they say, "we are afraid to grow old" according to Madam Lamnatu. The exposure of girls to different forms of abuse may result in teenage pregnancies and a subsequent cut in their education after re-opening.



# Response

Several non-governmental organizations like SONGTABA continue to intervene to support these alleged witches in the camps. They include organizing sensitization programs in communities and at the 'witch camps' to educate people on the dangers associated with the practice. SONGTABA has been one of the leading organizations in the re-integration processes by profiling to support them into their home communities or communities of their choices. They have led processes and actions that got District assemblies through local government to pass byelaws to out-law accusations, violence. They also run change agent specific programs targeted at chiefs, traditional leaders and other opinion leaders to change mindset about some of the toxic narratives.

Also, the government through the Ministry of Gender Children and Social Protection has in July 2020 re-introduced the Anti-Witchcraft bill aimed at criminalizing the menace to Ghana's parliament after Madam Denteh's issue came up. Similarly, the release of the COVID-19 stimulus package of 1 billion GHC by the government of Ghana is directed at supporting businesses to avert some of the looming economic disruption in the private sector. This disbursement is led by the National Board for Small Scale Institution (NBSSI) targeting vulnerable groups and small and medium scale businesses. According to Hajia Alima of SWIDA, a lot of women in the northern regions have been supported by CSOs and Municipal Offices to access this fund.



# Recommendations

## **Sensitization, Education & Behavioral change**

- CSOs, NGOs and the media should continue their sensitization, education, advocacy and campaigns on the impacts of COVID-19 on witchcraft accusations and responsive mechanisms.
- Targeted sensitization programs for religious and traditional leaders should be carried out by CSOs & NGOs to address the cost of gender-based violence and implications associated with false accusations of witchcraft even as we deal with the pandemic.
- During this period of the pandemic, community members need to speak up against violence in the case of alleged witches with the increasing economic disruptions. It is believed that, reporting cases is “washing their dirty linen in public” which prevents many from reporting cases of abuse in their communities according to Prince Imoro.

## **Enactment, Enforcement of Legislations/Bye laws**

- Chiefs and Traditional leaders must be encouraged to institute and enact community level policies and legislations outlawing witchcraft to prevent more accusations and suspicions as we face economic devastation due to COVID-19.

## **Policy**

- Government should be proactive by leading the inclusive re-integration measures and processes in partnership with other stakeholders due to the cuts in funding for CSOs & NGOs.



# Sexual Abuse & Violence against Girls

Teenage pregnancy is mostly an unintended pregnancy during adolescence mostly for girls between ages of 12 or 13, although it is usually 14 or older. Prior to the emergence of COVID-19, WHO reports that, adolescent pregnancies were a global problem occurring in high- middle, and low-income countries. Around the world, however, adolescent pregnancies are more likely to occur in already marginalized communities, commonly driven by poverty and lack of education and employment opportunities. Since the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic, Ghana has recorded alarming rates of teenage pregnancy in some areas due to the closure of schools according to the Africa Education Watch.

Meanwhile, a report by the Guttmacher Institute projected a shoot in numbers of unintended pregnancies due to COVID-19 to about 15,401,000 many of which according to them will occur among teenage girls globally (Riley et al, 2020). It is also concerning that the pressure on health institutions from rising cases is likely "to put a strain on the healthcare system, leading to a disruption in healthcare services, de-prioritization of sexual and reproductive health services and shortage of contraceptive commodities and essential drugs" (WHO, 2020) which are further compounding the issues.

A 2020 research by the Africa Education Watch revealed that about 20% of girls from 200 schools sampled for a study were already pregnant because of the closure of schools due to the pandemic (myjoyonline.com, 2020). Other reports from some senior high schools also indicate that other forms of violence are perpetrated against them. These relate to the punishment they endure when they are not in nose masks which is also because the distributed ones are smaller for many. The activities of some teachers on the illegal shaving of students with same scissors also put them at risk of contracting the virus coupled with the usage of same canes in cases of beatings.

Even though the legal age for marriage in Ghana remains 18 years with the age for consent to sex purged above 15years, several young girls below these ages are victims of sexual abuse through diverse means.



### **Defilement**

In Ghana, the offence of having sex with children 15 and below is defilement. According to Morhe and Morhe (2013), defilement is a “major reproductive justice issue and access to justice is of paramount importance to everyone particularly victims of defilement” Meanwhile, recent trends in teenage pregnancy cases during this time of COVID-19 reveals several cases involving children below 16 years. In recent developments, World Vision (2020) and others reported several cases of teen mothers who have been victims. This development is not surprising as mothers are alleged to be encouraging their children into transactional sex fail to recognize such (myjoyonline.com).

### **Rape**

Rape remains one of the deadliest forms of gender-based violence categorized under sexual violence that threatens the very survival and existence of its victims. Rape cases like defilement according to UN women can result in “life changing, unchosen results—a pregnancy” which affects victims socially, economically and otherwise.

According to a statement marking the day of the girl child by UN Women (2019), for rape cases, “home is not a safe place for millions of women and girls.” While reported teen pregnancies are not ascribed to varying forms of sexual assault and violence, rape could be one of the means through which girls in Ghana got pregnant during the partial lock down.

### **Consensual**

Other means through which young girls may get pregnant is through consensual sex recognize under the law for girls at 16 years, which is common in lowest and middle-income communities due to economic challenges (WVI, 2020). With the closure of schools for long periods, and girls staying at home and communities under less supervision of parents, the risk of exposure to consensual sex has increased. Most of these girls might be school dropouts, in SHS whose parents are negligent, or unable to provide for their basic needs.





### **Sexual exploitation**

The definition of sexual exploitation according to the Criminal Offences Amendments Act 2012 (849) under section 101A is the use of a person for sexual activity that causes or is likely to cause serious physical and emotional injury. Meanwhile, mother of a 14-year-old girl in the Ajumako Enyam district persuaded her to have unprotected sexual relation with a 32-year-old man (myjoyonline.com., 2020) This is also a case of defilement since the girl is below the 16 years to give consent for sex.

### **Incest**

Incest is considered a criminal offence under the Criminal Code 1960 (29) of Ghana. It is defined as having sexual relations with a blood relation including half-sisters or brothers. Incest is one of the ways through which many girls suffer sexual abuse during this pandemic since girls are stuck home with families who might take advantage of them sexually through rape or defilement. Incest is one of the four conditions under which a person can have legal abortion in Ghana.



# Prevalence

The prevalence of teenage pregnancy has been alarming since the outbreak of the pandemic in Africa (Plan International, 2020). Several reported cases from different regions and districts show an upsurge due to the closure of schools. It has been noted that in a report by the GES, the Volta Region recorded Six Hundred and Seventy-Six (676) teenage pregnancies among school children, spanning March to September 2020 (ghanaweb.com, 2020). This figure represented cases of 176 among primary pupils, 325 in JHS and the remaining 175 in SHS. This leaves a worrying trend since most students at the primary levels are below 16 years.


The Central Region recorded three thousand one hundred and ninety-eight (3,198) teen pregnancies from January to May 2020 (ghanabusinessnews, 2020). Similarly, a World Vision report (2020) between March and May recorded 51 teen pregnancies in Krachi West community since the three-weeks partial lockdown was instituted in March, representing a nine-fold increase from their annual report for the same area in 2019.

The Africa Education Watch in a 2020 survey consisting of 200 schools also recorded high numbers of teen pregnancies in the Mfantseman district, Upper Manya, Bongo and Bolga. Reports from the Kassena-Nankana West District of the Upper East Region indicated 43 teenage pregnancies in the just ended WASSCE and the BECE. Worrying developments from the Jirapa Municipality shows a figure of at least 27 school girls of which 21 JHS students and the remaining six are in the SHS according to the jirapa municipal girls' education Officer. She emphasized that, this happened during the closure of schools from March 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a 2020 report by the Daily Graphic, the Northern, Savannah and North East regions recorded about 221 teenage pregnancies in statistics shared by the Regional Director of Education, Dr. Peter Attafuah (Daily Graphic, 2020).

Table 11. Data on Teenage Pregnancy Hotspots in 2020  
(Curled from published articles and research By WVI)

No	Name of region or District	Period (2020)	No of cases recorded
1	Volta Region	March – September	676
2	Central region	January – May	3,198
3	Krachi West in Oti Region	March and May	51
4	Upper East Directorate	January - September	268
5	Jirapa Municipality Upper West	March	27
6	Northern, Savannah and North East regions	Jan to October	221



Some factors contributing to teenage pregnancies are poverty, negligent parenting, lack of sex education and limited educational and employment prospects. In other instances, girls willingly get pregnant in some communities to prove their fertility in Krachi (World Vision, 2020). To others, it is about access to opportunities for skills development interventions they see other teen mothers enjoy from some Civil Society and Non-Governmental Organizations or an opportunity for pampering by family members to sleep on beds as is the case in chorkor in the Greater Accra region according to Mamle, a hawker in Makola.



# Causes

## **ECONOMIC/POVERTY**

With the continuous rise in cases of the pandemic in Ghana, several parents who lost their jobs or suffered pay cuts continue to live in economic devastations with their families. These economic devastations of diverse forms have increased the risk of exposure for young girls because of their quest to provide basic needs for themselves and in other instances their families. The assessment found out about the different charades' abusers take advantage of to sexually exploit girls. Some of these charades include the "twa me portrait" translating to "take me a portrait photograph" commonly used to have a picture taken for their different social media accounts, "noodles, credit, momo".

Meanwhile, most of these girls in the Ajumako-Enyan-Essiam District of the Central Region relate their actions during the lockdown to the high rate of unemployment among their parents negatively exposing them to the mercy of "unscrupulous men who lured them into unprotected sex leading to teenage pregnancies" (My joyonline.com, 2020).

The introduction of social protection schemes like the school feeding program that guaranteed at least a meal in a day at school has been interrupted by the closure of schools further exposing these young girls to the risk of teenage pregnancy. Other instances included the engagement in transactional sex to be able to afford basic needs like sanitary towels. Evidence from previous research in Ga-Mashie (Biney, 2013) link poverty, lack of family support, and transactional sex to teenage pregnancy in the area.

Several news reports during the period of the emergence of the pandemic points to cases of transactional sex influenced by family members or peers. Sadly, several of these include cases of young girls under the age of 16 who cannot consent to sex under the aegis of the law. An August 2020 story on myjoyonline.com found that; a key factor pushing several young girls in the Ajumako-Enyan-Essiam District of the Central Region to unprotected sex was linked to the inability of parents and guardians to purchase sanitary pads and to properly feed them.



### **New work arrangements**

Similarly, for some children and families, the introduction of the new work arrangements like the shift systems and rationing left some mothers or guardians going to work at the mercy of leaving their wards with no supervision or with potential perpetrators and predators due to the closure of schools. For Emelia, a public servant in Bortiano, she will be at work when her 16-year-old ward who is pregnant will sneak out of the house to meet her boyfriend to return home before an unsuspecting Emelia does.

## **SOCIAL**

### **Closure of Schools**

After recording its first cases in March, Government of Ghana as part of its containment measures to curb the spread of the virus closed all schools in March. This was during the period when parents were going to work prior to the partial lockdown. Most parents left their children in their own care while many others hired nannies or had relatives who themselves were threats to these unsuspecting young girls. Other girls were at the mercy of unscrupulous men who were looking for unsuspecting girls to satisfy their sexual desires. It is not surprising therefore, that, most cases in the prevalence areas connects to the period of school closures. Similarly, the closures of school have deprived students who otherwise would have enjoyed one free meal a day due to the school feeding program that guaranteed meal.

### **Lack of commitment towards sex education**

The lack of preparedness of many parents to commit to teaching their children about sex at home is a major reason for their ignorance on repercussions. Similarly, the controversy in 2019 surrounding the refusal of major stakeholders like churches and mosques and PTA for the introduction of the CSE in Ghana is evident of the sacredness surrounding discussions on sex. Meanwhile, a 2016 article by an officer at the MoGCSP acknowledged the importance of introducing and strengthening sexuality education for especially young girls in schools.

### **Culture of silence**

The Culture of silence surrounding the inability of young people to open up to adults about any form of abuse they face is a contributing factor linked to the idolization of the penis and vagina. This culture of silence built through toxic narratives as children grow is a major reason hampering reporting.



### **Lack of access to contraception**

The emergence of the pandemic diverted attention from other health related services like family planning to fully responding and preparing health officials and institutions to taking care of suspected and actual cases. Globally, a projected 1.4 million women lost access to family planning services with about 26,000 in Ghana according to Marie Stopes (Kwafo, 2020). In Kumasi, for instance accessing health care became a necessity since hospitals like KATH closed to the public even before the partial lockdown began. Similarly, other centers of Marie Stopes Ghana clinics closed down due to the partial lockdown in April and May disrupting the family planning schedules of some women and girls.





# Impacts

The impacts of teenage pregnancy are huge on the economy, individual lives of mother and child, socially, emotionally and the psychological life of teen mothers. It affects their schooling in diverse ways while many girls end up in abusive child marriages. For other girls, they end up living with the traumatic experience of rape, defilement or sexual exploitation and the guilt of bringing a child to life.

Most teen mothers suffer alienation from friends, families and their communities through exclusion from programs and other social activities. The stigma causes many to drop out of school. In a case at an SHS in Kumasi, her classmates started calling her “born one” which led to her dropping out of school few days to writing of the WASSCE examination. Luckily, she agreed to write the exams with the support of her family and a few of her closest friends. The trauma, stigma teenage mothers suffer have potentials of affecting girls’ performance whilst back at school.

While some teen mothers are courageous to go back to school, others wait until they have delivered. For others who are transferred from one place to the other, they suffer a break in their education. Subsequently, teen mothers are likely to drop out of school due to financial issues.

As one of the causes of teenage pregnancy, poverty remains a major impact of teenage pregnancy for teen mothers given the threat it poses to the development of the unborn baby or baby when the mother is not able to provide for their basic needs. According to Mr. Kamaldeen Iddrisu of Plan Ghana, “Because of COVID-19, now economic activities are not going on as it used to be, so the people can be tempted to marry off their children so that they get money to do other things” (ghanaweb.com, 2020) contributing to the long chain of poverty within families.



# Response

The GES has instituted a re-entry policy aimed at facilitating the re-integration of teen mothers in schools even though the implementation of the Free Senior High School discriminates against teen mothers. According to some experts in the education sector, the centralized computerized school placement system is rigid and unfriendly to re-integrate them. Mr. Kofi Asare of the Africa Education Watch had stated at the dialogue in Accra that, the distribution of a unique code for 1st year SHS students valid for the three-year duration would have expired before the girls got to the final year in a reported case for teen mothers. Mr. Ansah an expert in the education sector also expressed worry about teen mothers going back to sit for another Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) with their mates going ahead of them which sometimes discouraged them to continue schooling (GNA, 2020). The Executive Director of the African Education Watch expressed disappointment on the lack of information and knowledge on the re-entry guidelines and policy on the part of some teachers and school authorities.

In a similar development, Biritwum et al (2015) in a research noted that most school authorities refused to support teen mothers due to religious and moral reasons. Whiles many believe it is a disgrace to their school, others worry that other girls might be influenced negatively. From the above narrative school authorities feel that "Pregnancy is a disgrace to the school as the school will be counted among schools with pregnancy cases..." (Biritwum et al, 2015; 43).

The passage of the Domestic Violence Act (732) and the Domestic Violence Legislative Instrument by Government is a step towards addressing sexual and gender-based violence. However, the lack of resources to activate the DV fund and support to the Domestic Violence and Victims Support Units of the Ghana Police Service is a hindrance to the discharge of their duties.

Some CSOs & NGOs like GNECC, WILDAF, Africa Education Watch, World Vision etc continue to advocate and campaign for stricter punitive measure against perpetrators of sexual abuse and violence against girls. These campaigns are to support and encourage victims to speak up by reporting cases are not yielding positive results due to the cumbersome and bureaucratic reporting mechanism and attitude of officers towards victims, where officers discourage victims from reporting abuses. Similarly, access to justice is impeded by inability of victims to pay for medical examinations, even though these services, according to provisions of the Domestic Violence Act are supposed to be free.



# Recommendations

## **Sensitization**

- Government through the Ministry of Education & GES need to strengthen and resource the Guidance and counseling units of schools to provide support for teen mothers and to offer other preventive services to teenagers.
- Family planning Units at hospitals should be strengthened to offer education and sensitization on adoption as one of the many options available to teen mothers after delivery.
- CSOs, NGOs and the media should strengthen their education, advocacy and campaign on issues of sexuality education between and among young people distinguishing between rape and defilement and the concept of consent.

## **Social services**

- Child care facilities should be accessible to teen mothers to enable them attend school to participate fully in activities.

## **Policy implications**

- The re-entry policy guidelines for teen mothers by the GES should be operational and include protection for girls against bullying, teasing and alienation by school authorities.
- Policy makers need to commit to instituting policy measures that ensure sexual and reproductive health services are accessible and affordable for all during emergencies.



# Cyber Bullying

The Oxford dictionary defines bullying as when a person “seeks to harm, intimidate, or coerce (someone perceived as vulnerable). Similarly, Cyber space represents the “online world”, which led to the popular charade of the “world has become global village”. “Cyber bullying” is used broadly in colloquial and formal terms first coined in the year 1999, (Englander et al, 2017) defines it as the “use of digital technology” to inflict harm, stalking, sexual harassment, threat of harm, bullying etc. repeatedly.

Athanasiades and Deliyanni-Kouimtzis (2010) believe that; though bullying can be defined in many ways, researchers mostly lean towards definitions that include “aggression, intention, repetition and an imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim” pointing out that, bullying may be “direct, verbal, and indirect or relational,” with well-known long-term effects on victims.

With the emergence of COVID-19 in Ghana since March 2020, Cyber bullying has become common in Ghana’s on-line space where feminists, and celebrities like Wendy shay, Lydia Forson, Selly Gelly (Amoaku, 2020, Kabutey, 2020, Nyavor, 2020) and many others have become targets through intimidation, harassment, use of abusive language, body shaming, threat of harm and violence. Similarly, several on-line feminists and gender activists have suffered range of attacks by perpetrators mostly to derail their work or resort to character assassination.

This is attributed to the increase in the use of social media and due to the partial lockdown, closure of schools, the introduction of new work arrangements, loss of jobs, election 2020 and an increase in ghost jobs. A research by Plan International (2020) found that, about 15% of girls and young women in Ghana face some forms of on-line gender harassment in the areas of “threats of sexual violence; sexual harassment; threats of physical violence; attacks on girls’ appearance or intersectional characteristics, including body shaming; unauthorized sharing of the girls’ content, including for the purpose of embarrassing the girls publicly; stalking; and generally insulting and abusive language”.



# Prevalence

According to SACAP (2018), Cyber bullying takes place anywhere online through SMS platforms like WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, twitter, email, etc. where people interact through viewing, participation and or sharing of content. In Ghana, Plan International (2020) found that about 92% of girls use WhatsApp while 60% are on Facebook with just 30% using Instagram. While these 3 are not the only platforms used, they are the most frequently used. Contents targeted at bullying others are generally harmful in nature and visible to others, thus causing great distress to targeted victims and others. Cyber bullying is on the rise as technology continues to expand and COVID-19 continues to linger around.

While cyber bullying may be in many forms, it can be targeted at children or adults. In Ghana, the common avenues for cyber bullying are numerous but it happens frequently on Facebook and WhatsApp where a sizeable number of Ghanaians are. It is worth noting that, while 28% of girls and young women between 16 years and 25 years according to Plan International faced gender online harassment on Facebook, activists and feminists also suffer harassment via Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. These platforms are commonly noted for sharing, discussing, commenting and forwarding of content for 'trolling and dragging'. Meanwhile, the use of hashtags, retweet and commenting to troll and drag victims is common on Twitter with Instagram less likely to be used for bullying of feminists and activists.




# Causes

While the causes of Cyber bullying may vary for different groupings with regards to gender, youth, children and adults, causes related to structural and systemic inequalities are almost constant. Cases of Cyber bullying heightened on Facebook from 2019 through 2020 as result of intensified on-line campaigning and advocacy by feminists and other activists. In the advent of the pandemic, cyberbullying is on the increase due to the high number of internet users during the partial lockdown, the vigorous campaign launched by major political parties on-line, increasing cases of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls during the pandemic etc.

Advocacy and campaigns by feminists on-line have been centered around challenging toxic gendered narratives that re-enforces discrimination against women and girls, SGBV, religion and culture and sexual and reproductive health rights of women. Another group facing cyber bullying are women in the entertainment industry notable among them during this pandemic period have been Wendy Shay, Tracy Boakye, Selly Gelly and Lydia Forson (Amoaku, 2020, Kabutey, 2020, Nyavor, 2020). From my personal experiences with bullies, the gender of the victim counts.

In recent times, Facebook and Twitter have been an important organizing and mobilizing tool for young feminists who have created a network of radical activists, discussing and changing mindsets around toxic narratives that disadvantage women and children. Targeted Cyber-bullying against feminists have been mostly planned and unleashed on them for their nuanced discussions around toxic gendered narratives. For these people, “key board gangsters” another name used to describe on-line feminists are a nuisance for interrogating discussions around gender discrimination and exploitation of women’s labour in unpaid care work.

Several discussions have been intentionally misconstrued to set these feminists up for speaking up against some of these injustices. In 2019, discussions around whether cooking is slavery led to series of attack on some members of a feminists group called “PepperDem” Ministries. Similarly, advocacy against rape jokes by Teacher Kwadwo, comedian Warris and others earned many including threats of physical violence, insults and use of abusive language openly and on Facebook messenger.



Similarly, most on-line feminists have “chopped block” (popular word for blocking) from different Facebook groups like Tell It Mums, Tell it all, Mumihood, striving woman and many others for calling out rape, rape apologists, domestic violence, defilement, challenging gender norms and toxic narratives in posts and comments during this period of the pandemic. The pandemic has heightened this vulnerability with the increasing reports by online media about injustices perpetuated against especially women and girls who are stuck at home with perpetrators.

### **Religion/ traditions/culture**


Another reason cyber bullying against feminists have been on the rise during this pandemic has been because of their continuous interrogation of religious and traditional texts and sermons. Issues under contention have been on Islamic text on SGBV and around the wearing of hijab. In June 2020, a Muslim feminist, Zainab Alhassan who auditioned to participate in the GMB pageant was attacked, threatened and harassed through WhatsApp, Facebook messenger, Facebook etc.

According to her, she was attacked because she shared her ordeal on Facebook about being discriminated against because of her hijab (GABS, 2020). Scores of Muslims on-line had accused her of going against the religion for daring to audition through verbal abuse and harassment (Ghanaweb.com, 2020). Zainab attributed the bullying to the high numbers of internet users in this time since according to her, “people who are not active on FB found their way to my DM and inbox to harass me”

Similarly, Bashiratu Kamal, a feminist suffered a similar fate after commenting on a post about a qur’anic surah with translation that “a husband could beat the wife”. She was threatened and called several names for insisting that the text was toxic. she was consistently harassed through her inbox, on her wall, through tags and through phone calls to her husband. For these feminists, it is believed the attacks were severe because there were lots of people on-line around the time of our incidents as a result of the pandemic. This is due to the loss of jobs, or the new forms of employment and unemployment allowing a lot of people to spend time on-line.

As a political year, one cause of cyber-bullying has been the activities of ‘foot soldiers’ from different political parties. This became intense after the emergence of the pandemic in March and the subsequent recovery and containment measures instituted. Also, the loss of jobs due to the economic devastation enabled many to become social media volunteers to politicians for campaign and propaganda purposes.





Series of threats ranging from harassment, insults, use of abusive languages in writing, intimidation were unleashed on some feminists after the announcement of a woman as the running mate of a major political party. There were attacks on them for their stance through labeling them as prostitutes, witches and harassment in their inboxes. Similarly, critiquing the President after any of his updates was met with strong words from the foot soldier community. With COVID-19, most people had lost their jobs and had the luxury of time to consistently vent their anger on anyone who disagreed with them. Similar occurrences were also unleashed by volunteers and foot soldiers of some political parties. With the advent of Technology, the anonymity of bullies makes it easier to prey on victims. To them, no one can trace them, can see them or knows them.



# Impacts

Cyber-bullying can have a telling effect on victims leaving them with scars and wounds to deal with for the rest of their lives. What distinguishes cyber-bullying from the traditional form is that; it is everywhere. One cannot run away because it becomes like a shadow following everywhere because of the medium; phone, tablets, etc. from platforms and apps like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, emails etc. The devastating effect on the impact of COVID-19 on cyber-bullying on victims cannot be quantified since it is unimaginable, and lingers everywhere with victims coupled with dealing with the disruptions associated with the pandemic in their lives. Lives have been lost with others living in depression, emotional traumas and being triggered at the mention of some apps or platforms. According to SACAP (2018), "the digital world lets the bully into your bedroom, a reality that for many young adults is both terrifying and debilitating."

Victims go through emotional and psychological traumas that affect their existence and self-esteem. For Selly Gelly who was bullied by a social media user, she said the experience made her doubt herself for a moment since the insult was targeted at challenging her ability to be called a woman. The abuser had called her barren and ugly because she didn't have make-up on. Meanwhile, about 53% of young girls and women surveyed in the Plan international research (2020) said they suffered mental or emotional stress after experiences some form of cyber bullying.

Cyber-bullying is much more covert than traditional bullying and, as a result, victims are hard to identify and perpetrators, should they wish, can remain anonymous. It is often more intense as bullies are braver when they can hide behind the safety of a screen because they are completely removed from their victim's reaction- seldom can they see the vulnerability of their victim and the damage caused emotionally and psychologically. Perpetrators also easily create new accounts with different names when blocked by victims. Most victims also suffer from low self-esteem as a result of the trolling and dragging from perpetrators.

The closure of schools and introduction of e-learning platforms for students exposed many to cyber-bullying in many forms. The Executive Director of the Africa Education Watch, Mr. Kofi Asare at the dialogue in Accra lamented about how their search for how the 2020 BECE and SSSCE exams leaked linked them to an internet site where different forms of sexual activities were taking place including the selling of nude pictures of innocent girls.



# Response

The establishment of the National Cyber Security Center in Ghana in 2018 to support the regulation of the cyber space. This move has not helped much since their focus has been directed mostly on fraud and extortion. Also, the institution has not introduced any special responsive mechanism to address issues related to cyber-bullying even with the increase in internet users during this time of the pandemic.

The Ministry of Communication in partnership with other partners' awareness on "if you see something suspicious, report it to Report an incident" during the times of COVID-19. Unfortunately, these are focused on other forms of cybercrimes like data protection and E-transactions.

CSOs and NGOs in the on-line spaces like the Africa Digital Rights Hub have been engaging in advocacy and campaigns to raise awareness against cyber-bullying of girls.



# Recommendations

## **Security**

- The popular “Protect your sanity” strategy by on-line feminists to block, unfriend or not accept new requests. You don’t accept friend requests from people with no profile pictures or accept requests during heated debates on gender norms and toxic narratives.
- Parents should pay attention to what their kids spend their time on online and also have parental guidance protections where necessary.

## **Sensitization and Education**

- The COVID-19 education, sensitization and support services should include support for victims of all forms of on-line violence.
- Advocacy and campaign on creating safe spaces on-line should be strengthened especially in this time through using the privacy settings, the block button and strong passwords.

## **Social Support Services**

- Family support is very important as Zainab shared that; “Had it not been because of the strong family support system I had; I wouldn’t have known how to manage the online bullying. Which mostly came from religious followers on the social media space.”
- Creation of an on-line support group to support victims through their healing with different experts during this period of the pandemic is necessary. According to Zainab, the support she received from the feminists and allies after the incidence was enough to keep her going.



# Matters Arising

While several measures have been put in place to address SGBV in many ways and forms, there still requires efforts at responding to some gaps in law and approach. The failure of the law to punish perpetrators of sexual exploitation, violence and abuse is a gap that needs addressing. Similarly, several attempts by child rights advocates to address the injustices in the Criminal Offences Act of 1960, which entrenches violators' impunity in relation to perpetrators of sexual exploitation which in the case of minors is defilement have fallen on deaf ears. It is paramount to harmonise provisions in legislation such as the Criminal Offences Act 1960, the Children's Act and Juvenile Justice Act to strengthen child protection in the areas of the legal age of marriage to the legal age of consent (pulse.com, 2018).

Even though Ghana has since 2007 passed a Domestic Violence Act, 2007 (Act 732), and its Legislative Instrument Domestic Violence Regulations, 2016 (LI 2237), providing the framework within which survivors of domestic violence can access justice and support, this framework has not been effective. This is due to the failures of successive governments to ensure that agencies and organizations tasked with the responsibility to ensure the management of Domestic violence are functional.

Further to this, calls for the activation of the Domestic Violence Fund and the provision of free medical care and screening to victims, as stipulated in Act 732 have not been activated. The Domestic Violence Act 2007 (732) does not extend protection beyond the home to schools. For this reason, in 2019, the DV coalition called for the President to charge the Ministry of Education through the Ghana Education Service to develop, implement and fund a sexual harassment policy in schools to extend protection to girls.



# General Recommendations

## **Enactment of Legislations**

- Government should fast track passage of the Anti-Witchcraft bill. INGOs and other Local NGOs & CSOs should continue providing support through education, research, advocacy and campaign to educate the mass about the dangers of perpetuating all forms of violence.

## **Institutional support & Enforcement of existing Legislations**

- Government as a matter of urgency needs to activate the Domestic Violence fund.
- Government should resource institutions who are tasked to provide support and education to victims especially in seeking justice for victims of abuse.
- Proper coordination of institutions like the Ghana Police Service, Social Welfare, Ghana Medical Association and the justice systems should be enhanced.

## **Social**

- The provision of shelters for victims of SGBV should be prioritized as a responsive mechanism to effectively protect victims.
- Gender should be consciously integrated into all government's containment measures.
- It is important to establish early childhood care for teen mothers to make their re-entry effective.

## **Sensitization and Education**

- Media houses with local contents especially electronic media should partner with NGOs and CSOs in raising awareness about the causes and impacts of cyber bullying, witchcraft accusations to the country.
- We need to develop tailor made educational programs targeted at emphasizing the difference between rape and defilement.

## **STAR-Ghana Foundation**

- As a matter of urgency STAR-Ghana should lead the organization of a convening involving stakeholders within the education sector to develop and discuss a road-map on the re-entry guidelines for potential teen mothers and pregnant girls
- Lead the engagement with Members of Parliament and the MoGCSP to lobby for the passage of the Anti-Witchcraft bill
- Engage the National Cyber Security agency on the need to include SGBV in their work during the COVID-19 pandemic.



# Conclusions

All forms of SGBV are harmful and cause psychological and emotional traumas for victims. Cases of teenage pregnancy have risen during this pandemic which has no end in sight. It is possible the country might face another “shadow pandemic” if schools continue to be closed from 2021. There needs to be concerted efforts aim at addressing issues of legislations, policy and awareness raising in protecting the vulnerable.

Evidently, it is important for government to adequately integrate responsive mechanisms on S&GBV into COVID-19 response focusing on making existing legal frameworks effective, providing and strengthening institutional support, mainstreaming gender in responses in ways that dismantle toxic narratives.

Ghana needs to put in place more pragmatic measures to ensure our commitment towards the realizations of the AU agenda 2063 to “build our human capital which is our most precious resource” through the “elimination of gender disparities at all levels of education” Our commitment towards the SDGS which focuses on leaving no one behind.



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