



IN BRIEF



# THE PRIVATE SECTOR'S ROLE IN MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON VULNERABLE WOMEN AND GIRLS IN NIGERIA

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## Introduction

In recent weeks, the Nigerian private sector has assumed a leading role in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. On March 27, the Private Sector Coalition Against COVID-19 (CACOVID), spearheaded by the Central Bank of Nigeria, the Aliko Dangote Foundation and Access Bank, was established to mobilize private sector resources towards supporting the government's response to the crisis.

CACOVID will also help mobilize private sector thought leadership, raise public awareness and buy-in for COVID-19 prevention, and provide direct support to strengthen the healthcare sector's capacity to respond to the crisis. To date, CACOVID has mobilized around NGN 26 billion (USD 72 billion), 22% of its NGN 120 billion target, from private sector organizations including GTBank, UBA, IHS, the African Finance Corporation, Lafarge Africa, Access Bank, the Dangote Group and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation.

## COVID-19 Poses a Significant Threat to Private Sector Activity

The private sector has a direct stake in limiting the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Unlike any other crisis in living memory, the pandemic is taking an unprecedented and direct toll on business activity in all sectors. Drastic but necessary containment measures to curb the spread of the virus have seen lockdowns and travel restrictions imposed across the globe, disrupting supply chains and abruptly halting business and employment for millions of people.

In Nigeria, a month-long lockdown has been in place in Lagos and Ogun States and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja since 31 March. Lagos State is the economic hub of the country, and it is also the epicenter of the pandemic with 55% percent of all confirmed cases (as of 22 April).

While most of CACOVID's partner companies are large, resourced corporations with the technological and logistical capabilities to maintain business continuity by moving work offsite, the vast majority of businesses in Nigeria lack this advantage. However, many of these much smaller businesses are a crucial part of the private sector's supply chain, without which, larger corporations cannot survive. They consist of a multitude of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) from the smallholder farmers who supply agricultural inputs to food processing conglomerates, to the street vendors who distribute products for the fast-moving consumer goods sector. Moreover, many of these MSMEs are women-owned businesses. In the formal sector, women account for 47.8 percent of MSME entrepreneurs but many more operate within the informal sector where over 82 percent of women are employed.

## Importance of Increasing the Gender Sensitivity of CACOVID's Response

It is vital to ensure that gender is mainstreamed into CACOVID's priorities at this early stage of its existence. Thus far, the Coalition's focus has been on strengthening the healthcare response to the crisis by providing funding to expand and strengthen medical facilities in the six geographical zones of the country. This includes:

- The creation of testing, isolation and treatment centers;
- The provision of Intensive Care Units (ICUs); and
- The establishment of molecular testing labs.

While these are urgent priorities, neglecting the unique and unequal (near- and long-term) impacts of the pandemic on women and girls, risks leaving them further behind on the journey towards sustainable development.

- As health resources are diverted to address the pandemic, women also face additional challenges to accessing sexual and reproductive health services at a time when sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and violence against women (VAW) are on the rise. Reporting from 24 states across Nigeria shows that the number of reported incidents of domestic violence spiked by 56 percent during the first two weeks of April compared with the same period in March, after lockdown measures were enacted on 31 March. In Lagos State, cases of domestic violence have surged by over 100 percent during the lockdown period (as of 14 April) compared with the number of cases reported for the entire month of March.
- The already unequal burden of childcare and domestic work is exacerbated under quarantine as schools close and securing the family's health becomes imperative. This includes increased time spent fetching water for handwashing protocols and other arduous duties, which can create additional stressors on women's mental and emotional wellbeing.

- With more women in low-paying, insecure, informal work, the sharp spike in unemployment from the COVID-19 pandemic will disproportionately affect women. In Kenya, 60 percent of all job losses recorded since the crisis were held by women. Additionally, women still in employment disproportionately occupy jobs on the frontlines of the pandemic as nurses, cleaners, supermarket cashiers, and market traders, risking their health and safety, as well as those of their families.
- School closures are already having a severe impact in Nigeria with long-term consequences for human capital accumulation and talent acquisition. Female students are particularly at risk and for many girls, a few months' absence from school could mean the end of their education, particularly if family resources remain under strain in the aftermath of the crisis. They may also be excluded from the very limited availability of distance-learning opportunities as boys' education is prioritized due to ingrained cultural norms. The adverse impact on girls' education could also lead to an increase in early marriage in communities where this practice is already prevalent.



## Private Sector Strategies For Supporting Vulnerable Women And Girls Amid Covid-19

There is scope to incorporate a gender perspective into CACOVID's response to COVID-19 by ensuring that gender is proactively built into its thought leadership and advocacy functions, and that gender dimensions are embedded within existing funding programmes.

In particular, UN Women recommends that 20 percent of CACOVID's overall resources be dedicated to supporting the humanitarian and socio-economic recovery needs of the most vulnerable women and girls affected by the crisis. Of this amount, we recommend that 10 percent is allocated to address the specific health challenges women are likely to face as a result of the pandemic, including increasing protection for women on the frontlines of efforts to combat the disease and increasing resources available for victims of increased SGBV. The remaining 10 percent can be used to shield vulnerable women from the economic fallout of the crisis.

Some CACOVID partners, such as Famfa Oil Limited, have already demonstrated the feasibility of this proposal by earmarking part of their donations for targeted vulnerable groups. In this case, Famfa Oil allocated NGN50 million of its NGN1 billion donation to the National Commission for Refugee Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons, the majority of whom are women and children. Prospective donors can emulate this example by devoting significant portions of their donations towards protecting the health, safety and economic wellbeing of vulnerable women affected by COVID-19.

Donors can also push for greater female representation within CACOVID's steering committees<sup>2</sup> to facilitate greater gender sensitivity and inclusion in its interventions. Just 3 out of 19 members on the Coalition's three steering committees are women, including zero representation on the core Funding Committee<sup>3</sup>. Research shows that when more women are represented in decision-making positions, more resources are allocated to social issues that benefit all.

Companies which contribute at least NGN1 billion naira are eligible to join the Coalition's steering committees, presenting an opportunity to address this imbalance going forward.

### Recommended Mitigation Measures On The Impact Of Women And Girls By The Private Sector

Specific measures private sector companies can take to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and girls include:

- Signing up to the UN Women/UN Global Compact Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) to show commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment in the workplace, marketplace and community. This is even more important during COVID-19, as it ensures that a gender perspective will be included in your company's response to the pandemic.
- Ensuring women and men are given equal time off for childcare responsibilities to help reduce the burden of childcare responsibilities on women and change societal norms that allocate these roles almost exclusively to them.
- Invest in expanding flexible working arrangements for women and men including provision of technology and equipment for disadvantaged workers.
- Support women-owned businesses, particularly in the informal sector, with affirmative procurement to provide essential supplies during the crisis such as face masks, hand sanitizers and other protective equipment.
- Make supporting gender equality and women's empowerment, including ending SGBV and VAW, a central pillar of your company's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities, including contributing donations to organizations and agencies at the forefront of delivering Sustainable Development Goal 5 on empowering all women and girls such as UN Women and the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Development in Nigeria.

<sup>1</sup> See: [www.cacovid.org](http://www.cacovid.org)

<sup>2</sup> CACOVID's taskforce consists of: 1. The Funding Committee, which is responsible for providing and raising funds for CACOVID's Relief Fund; 2. The Technical Committee, which is responsible for intellectual leadership around testing issues, treatment protocols and isolation centers; and 3. The Operational

<sup>3</sup> Committee, which is responsible for logistics and communications.

Current members of the Funding Committee are: 1. Godwin Emezie, Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Aliko Dangote, Chairman of Dangote Industries, Herbert Wigwe, CEO of Access Bank, Jim Ovia, Chairman of Zenith Bank, Tony Elumelu