



VOICES FROM THE GRASSROOTS: WORKING THROUGH THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

Dear partners, members, and friends,

Looking around at the impact of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) on ourselves, our work and the communities we work with, the reality is more than sobering. In the face of this crisis, governments across the region have left many of us completely exposed. Most women from the greater Horn of Africa region, have never enjoyed the benefits of quality, affordable healthcare, welfare, or safety net mechanisms, rather we struggle daily just to keep our heads above water under ruling regimes who couldn't be bothered to throw us a rope.

COVID-19 has highlighted the dangerous impacts women endure as a result of our widespread exclusion from positions of power and decision-making in our own communities and nations. This position leaves us in the dark. We cannot tell how far we are from a complete disaster or when we will be hit – whether now or later or if we have already reached the tipping point.

Despite the measures that have been put in place by national governments and health organizations, millions of us continue to have limited to no access to soap and clean water. Many women have to walk for miles to reach a water pump or a well. 80% of women across the region earn a living to feed their families, based on day-to-day work. These women cannot survive aggressive lockdown measures, as most have no accumulated resources, land, property or savings. Women face these bleak realities because the market economy has been instrumentalized by patriarchy to keep women at the bottom of the profit chain while exploiting their labor. Already disadvantaged, women are acutely exposed to the economic hardships caused by COVID-19 and state-enforced containment measures.

Patriarchal structures and institutions routinely expose women to violence and exploitation under the pretext of traditions and religion, and we are already seeing that this violence is increasing with the COVID-19 outbreak. This pandemic has been added to our long list of heavy burdens in the greater Horn of Africa. Another obstacle that affects us disproportionately and sidelines the issues we have long been struggling to bring to national and international attention.

The spread of the COVID-19 reminds us, within the women's movement, that there is no room for compromise around women's access to resources and equal pay. In this part of the world, issues like access to inheritance and personal status laws and access to justice are fundamental for our well-being and protection. Our exposure to this dangerous disease without any shield, should alert us that our struggle is political to the bone and our fight for shared responsibilities and equality in income and decision-making equality will only be won when we have accountable governance systems.

As I conclude, I would like to share that SIHA is maintaining close communication with our members, staff and affiliates to determine what is needed to complement their advocacy work. The information gathered from this is enabling to understand what support strategies the movement can effectively put in place. Most important of all and as is typical of our feminist identity and work modality in a very fragile and volatile region – during this COVID-19 outbreak, we are talking with each of our colleagues across the region to prioritize all aspects of their health in tandem with their personal and professional demands.

In solidarity,

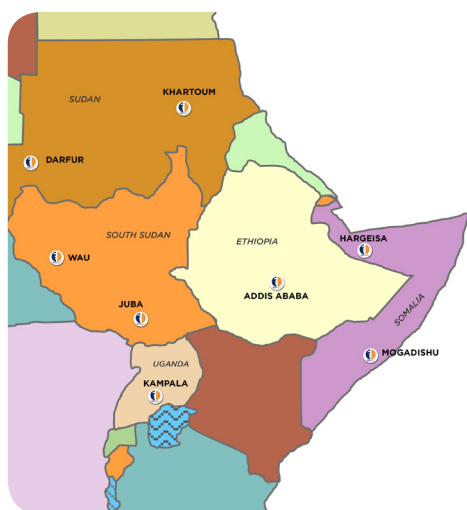
Hala Alkarib

Regional Director



Photo Credit: Sumy Sadurni/AFP via Getty Images

IT IS NOT 'BUSINESS AS USUAL' IN THE GREATER HORN OF AFRICA



In order to contain the spread of COVID-19, governments throughout the greater Horn of Africa region have banned public meetings, gatherings, and training, closed borders, implemented curfews, and restricted domestic movement. In some countries working hours have been reduced to 5 hours a day. These government measures and directives have greatly impacted the continuity of SIHA's program and project implementation, especially because SIHA's activities and approaches emphasize physical dialogue, group interaction and engagements such as trainings, meetings, and the provision of direct care to migrant girls, SGBV survivors and IDP communities. SIHA's management and programme team are investigating various options including adaptive implementation mechanisms, delaying some activities, and redirecting other activities to respond to the needs of beneficiaries in light of the current crisis.

Noticing that the needs and well-being of many women and girls across the greater Horn of Africa region are being neglected by COVID-19 containment and prevention measures, SIHA has leveraged our social media accounts and our networks across the region to advocate for measures that will protect the women and girls who face increased vulnerability and precarity as COVID-19 continues to spread. Our advocacy has been focused both at the regional level and the national levels. We have released and promoted statements demanding that national and local governments, as well as multinational companies, and INGOs collaborate with civil society to ensure that women and girls in the informal economy, slum/shanty settlements, IDP/POC camps, and incarcerated women are provided with the access, means, and knowledge to protect themselves, along with the financial support to weather the COVID-19 response measures, including public shutdowns.

We are also closely monitoring worrying trends in the region which illustrate the potential for governments to use the COVID-19 outbreak as an excuse or a cover for abuses of power. As these circumstances continue to develop, we hope to collaborate with our donors on shifting direction within our programming to align with the shifting needs of our project beneficiaries in light of the COVID-19 outbreaks.



PERSPECTIVES FROM SIHA STAFF ACROSS THE REGION

Photo Credit: Badru Katumba

UGANDA

“ Uganda has undergone increasingly strict lock-down measures over the past several weeks, including the ban of public transport, non-essential movement and a nation-wide curfew that has been instituted from 7:00pm to 6:30am. There have been mixed feelings regarding the lack of consideration of the lived realities of masses of vulnerable people, especially women and girls in the informal economy who are bearing the brunt of the hardships brought on by this crisis. Aside from the fact that the measures that have been put in place have created an air of anxiety, stress and desperation in extreme cases, the proof of the gendered implications of the outbreak are visibly evident in print and social media with horrid accounts, images and clips of women (especially women street vendors) being battered and attacked by state operatives”.

ETHIOPIA

“I am personally taking the most precautionary means of staying healthy; especially as an expecting mother; and urging my family members to do so. The level of stress and uncertainty especially relating to delivery procedures, the fact that I cannot avoid going to hospitals and the many questions I have related to my situation does increase the stress level.”

“The COVID-19 crisis has considerably altered our daily life as staff and the beneficiaries in Ethiopia. Working at home presents additional challenges there because electricity, internet, and water routinely fail, causing frequent interruptions of staff’s progress. Our stress levels have been heightened by the adverse effects our programming has suffered and the weight of unmet deadlines hanging over our heads. We are particularly stressed by the knowledge that many of SIHA’s beneficiaries in Ethiopia are particularly vulnerable during this crisis.”

SOMALIA

“Working from home is not easy - we have lost touch with our normalcy, but I am sending out positive messages to encourage us to keep on working and having the strength to keep on serving our community, as much as we can, in our current capacity.

The lockdown implemented in Somalia has impacted the ability of SIHA to hold in-person support and programming. Productivity has been limited due to poor internet connectivity, project implementation has stalled, and internal measures have been implemented to limit fieldwork for safety reasons. While this has been a challenge, it has not prevented me from continuing to engage in awareness and advocacy, as SIHA has strengthened its remote processes of data collection on reported cases of VAW due to COVID-19 in order to inform future program work”



Artist: Fred Mutebi

SOMALILAND

“Our family life has changed, because everyone is anxious about what will happen tomorrow. We worry about food prices rising, and about losing the funding to sustain our jobs and the projects we implement.

In Somaliland, all public meetings, social gatherings, conferences, and workplaces have been banned or severely limited. This has significantly impacted our work, especially project implementation significantly. We have had to put a number of activities on hold. That said, we remain devoted to our work continuing to do the work that can be done remotely. We are fortunate that we have access to reliable internet in our homes, however working from home presents new challenges in balancing family and work obligations.

Despite the challenges, we are continuously monitoring the circumstances of vulnerable women and girls in Somaliland and the rest of the region - firming up advocacy around the challenges they are facing.

SOUTH SUDAN

“In South Sudan, mistrust of the government is very common, and in the context of the COVID-19 crisis this translates to growing fear and uncertainty stemming from uncertainty about the truth regarding the spread of the virus. We as staff, and the beneficiaries we work with face a much more bleak reality regarding access to supplies (such as masks, gloves, sanitizers, soap) as well as food and water, because the nation is among the most dependent in the region on importing supplies across their borders. Neither does Wau have masks or sanitizers in supply nor x-ray machines and ventilators in Wau. This means that for essential activities, like running the survivor support services provided by the one-stop center, we must continue our work without any protective supplies. In addition to fears for our personal health and safety of themselves and that of our families, we fear the economic hardship caused by this crisis - which is already evident. More families are forcing their girl children into arranged marriages out of desperation for the bride price. This is a worrying trend that is typical of such economic hard times. Unfortunately, our levels of stress and worry are making our burden heavier”.

SUDAN

“Working at home has affected my productivity negatively as at home every two days there is one day that has no electricity from 6:00 am to 3:30 pm and the second day from 6:00 pm to 9:00 or 10:00 pm so half of the days I end up working during the evening and at night.

The government of Sudan has closed its borders and banned all public meetings, social gatherings, conferences, and workshops. A curfew has been imposed from 6:00 pm - 6:00 am and the end of the working day is 2:00 pm, severely limiting the working hours of the office. Our office in Sudan has adapted internal work processes to adjust to the changing environment, including reducing contact hours between staff by taking rotating shifts in the office, and limiting in-person interactions with vulnerable populations. While we have been busy with adjusting and reporting on programs, we have also engaged with girls associations in internally displaced camps (Abushok, Alsalam) to procure hand sanitizers and masks and provide increased support.

One of our biggest challenges that many of us face while working in the home is the expectation and pressure that we, as women, should attend to domestic needs. We see this challenge cut across background and class - affecting women like us who have office jobs and our counterparts who sell tea in the streets, alike. We are very aware that these experiences speak to a disturbing trend whereby, even when women are the primary income-earners of the household, their professional life is disregarded when they are at home, something inescapable while this crisis continues. This comes from underlying ideas that the home is a place in which men govern and women serve.”

DJIBOUTI

“Personally, these measures make me feel completely immobilized, completely useless and unproductive. Everything has come to a complete halt, and with increasing securitization and rising case numbers, it is difficult to see when work will be resumed. The biggest challenge is that I rely entirely on fieldwork: to meet women, talk to women, work with women, and this has become impossible now.”

REGIONAL SECRETARIAT

The Covid-19 measures that have been instituted in Uganda have affected SIHA's work two-fold because Kampala, Uganda is host to the Regional Secretariat where the regional coordination team sits, and where the Uganda-specific programme is hosted. As a result, the entire team is working from home regularly utilizing online communication tools to remain in touch with the rest of the team across the region. That said, the entire regional coordination team has made it a mission to exponentially increase the check-ins with the teams across the region. Typical of the Horn of Africa region, there are challenges that have always inhibited this communication with regular power-cuts in many of the countries, unstable internet especially with so much traffic at such a critical time. The Uganda-based staff have reported that meetings take much longer due to all the delays related to unreliable internet connections. This lost working time puts additional strain and stress on the staff.

A CLOSING STATEMENT OF SOLIDARITY

Now is the opportunity for women's rights movements across the globe to be galvanised. We cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that COVID-19 and subsequent government response measures are placing women and girls in very precarious situations and exacerbating gender-based inequalities. As such we re-affirm SIHA's commitment to advocating for feminist and gendered responses to the crisis within the greater Horn of Africa region.

As feminists, we acknowledge the fears, worries, and pain that our members, beneficiaries, staff, friends and families are enduring now. In some cases our social networks are our strongest source of support, but it is important during these times for each of us to practice both self-care and collective care.

We know that the effects of this pandemic on the social, economic and financial fronts across the globe will be felt and visible for a very long time. This is precisely why it is so important to ignite the policy and legal reform that will shield women and girls, particularly those in vulnerable communities and living circumstances, from disproportionate harm and exposure and advocate for their visibility in all efforts to mitigate the spread of the virus. As always, we stand resolutely and uncompromisingly against all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls.

Martha Tukahirwa
Regional Advocacy and Communications Officer

Strategic Initiative
for Women in the
Horn of Africa

