



## **COVID-19 is a threat to Gender Equality. Let's #ChooseToChallenge**

**Historical Glimpse:** It's March 8, 2021, and today we hold the 44<sup>th</sup> commemoration since the UN officially recognised International Women's Day (IWD) in 1977 to recognise achievements in the struggle for women's empowerment and gender equality. Since the historic UN Security Council Resolution of the 32<sup>nd</sup> regular session of the United Nations General Assembly in 1977, March 8 has become an important day in modern history when it comes to the struggle for gender justice. From its first commemoration in Uganda in 1984 (pioneered by then first lady Miria Obote) IWD has evolved considerably.

The 2021 theme "*Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world*" is both important and timely. It reminds us of a) socio-economic inequalities that COVID-19 has deepened, and b) the commendable but often overlooked efforts by women in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Deepening Inequalities:** COVID-19 has and continues to leave a heavy impact globally. The COVID-19 induced lockdowns; affected women and girls' routine access and uptake of health services, including maternal and neonatal health service access; placed a heavier financial burden, not least on female-headed households as many women are in the private sector and given the increase in prices of food items. Additionally, the lockdown catalysed a surge in cases of Intimate Partner Violence as some women were quarantined with abusive spouses, affected access to justice for abuses meted on women due to difficulties in reporting cases, and affected the asylum process as many borders are closed. All these ingredients broadly contributed to impeding the realisation of globally sustainable gender equality.

Relatedly, in the field of academics and knowledge production, recent studies suggest that the pandemic may have amplified (the) gender gap in medical literature too, as the number of male authors is growing faster than the number of female authors on COVID-19 related

publication. The voices of male experts swamping females voices in the media, women perspectives are under-represented in much COVID-19 related news, and female representation in COVID-19 taskforces remain paltry – all of which affects the overall framing of the pandemic.

**Women's struggle against COVID-19:** The pandemic has brought to light women and girls' contributions in averting existential threats. Women's remarkable contributions in flattening the curve of new infections, supporting communities, and the search for vaccines cannot be overstated. In Uganda, the fight against COVID-19 successes cannot be discussed without recognising courageous women's contributions, including but not limited to Dr Ruth Achieng (Minister of Health), Hon. Amelia Kyambadde (Minister of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives) and Dr Diana Atwine (Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Health).

Globally, women and girls have and continue to contribute to writing the history of the discovery of COVID-19 related vaccines. BioNTech, a biotechnology company co-founded by Dr Özlem Türeci, a visionary female physician and entrepreneur, developed the first approved RNA-based vaccine. Notably, the 2020 3M Young Scientist challenge was scooped by Anika Chebrolu, a zealous Indian American girl who identified a lead molecule that can selectively bind to the spike protein of the SARS-COV-2 virus and potentially inhibit the novel coronavirus. Furthermore, the contributions of a) Prof. Sarah Gilbert, a Biologist and Vaccinologist from Oxford University and co-founder of AstraZeneca, b) Dr Kathrin U. Jansen, head of Vaccine Research and Development at Pfizer – figures towering in the development of vaccines, and c) Maj. Gen. Wei Chen (PhD), who was awarded the title "People's Hero" for her leadership in phase 3 trials for the Sinopharm Vaccines, shall forever be remembered.

**Uncomfortable reminder:** Whereas women contribute to saving humanity worldwide, many still suffer abject poverty, wrestle unspeakable misery, and fight unbecoming discrimination as their pay, participation, and power in decision-making remain far below acceptable standards. In medicine, 70% of health and social care workers are women, yet many still receive low pay compared to their male counterparts. As the majority of frontline workers, female medics are at risk of most at risk of contracting COVID-19 and associated psychological breakdown as they are directly exposed to patients. We cannot afford to sweep their lived experiences under the carpet.

Whereas refugees are among vulnerable populations hit hardest by the novel Coronavirus, they too have stepped up in the fight against the pandemic and to protect their communities. Currently, the world is benefiting from refugee women's supply of Personal Protective Equipment in Kenya, supporting online learning in Jordan, improving healthcare and strengthening communities in Ukraine, raising awareness about COVID-19 in Bangladesh, promoting peaceful co-existence between refugees and hosts in Uganda through community activism and sensitisation, etc.

**Commendable progress:** Challenges notwithstanding, Uganda has made commendable progress in inclusion and promoting the political participation of women as its political landscape transitioned in the past 40 years. During the first official commemoration of IWD in 1985, Uganda had no women in the Cabinet, only 1 woman Member of Parliament, no female judge, 1 female professor, 1 female Permanent Secretary, and 3 female Under Secretaries – clearly, a rather uncomfortable image.

Currently, 28 out of 80 ministers are women, and 146 seats reserved for female district representatives in parliament. Besides the political goodwill and relatively secure operational environment, such successes can further be attributed to arguably progressive laws and policies, including the 1995 Constitution, especially Articles 31 (rights of the family), 32 (rights of women), and 33 (rights of women).

As we commemorate this momentous day, we are confronted with two realities; celebrating progress on women's rights on the one hand, and preparing for new hurdles on the other. IWD reminds us that the absence of women's perspectives and swamping women out of the gender equation risks further marginalising women amidst a global health crisis, with possibly dire consequences. Any further widening of the already troublesome gender rift can and will only accelerate the backsliding that the women's movement has long been fighting against.

As we take stock of our actions and struggle for a gender-just and fair world, it's worth remembering that IWD and the quest for gender equality is not a competition between men and women. Instead, it's an important day to pause and reflect on successes realised thus far, to mobilise against known hurdles and lobby key allies (including men and boys), and to drum up support towards the much-desired gender equality.

**Call to Action:** Promisingly, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is more prepared than the 20<sup>th</sup> to face the known challenges. What is the world we desire for ourselves, for our mothers, sisters, daughters, female relatives, friends, and colleagues, and what actions are within our reach?

- i. Invest in girl child education: COVID-19 has further demonstrated that girls' education benefits both themselves and their households, but also the whole world. As such, may this day re-awaken us to audit progress made in tackling barriers to access and uptake of girls' education services, establish scholarships for women and girls, and motivate us to establish more opportunities for girls, including in the field of science and technology.
- ii. Revise salaries for health workers: Given that over 70 per cent of frontline health workers are women, revisions to health workers pay and welfare will make an important contribution to gender equality.
- iii. Recognise, award and promote female front-liners in the fight against COVID-19: These include health workers, vaccinologists, pharmacist, educationists, transporters, traders, etc, all of whom are role models who inspire the younger generation and promote creativity and national development.
- iv. Strengthen access to justice for crimes meted against women and girls: We will need to promote safer spaces for women and girls to report crimes, expedite investigations and trials as guided by existing laws and policy frameworks, and establish and support special court sessions within the justice system for timely handling of cases.
- v. Improve the quality of, access to and uptake of health care services: this is particularly the case for hard-to-reach areas of Uganda which have significant constituencies of rural and vulnerable women and girls, both citizens and the refugees they host.
- vi. Support women's leadership training initiatives: Commendably, women in leadership at various levels have demonstrated steady control and support to fellow women and communities in general. Supporting training of Local Councils, Refugee Welfare Councils, and community opinion leaders is a worthwhile investment that enables women to amplify their support in the fight against COVID-19.