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## COMMENTARY | VIOLENCE

# Beyond the COVID-19 Vaccine: The “Epidemic” of Violence in Ghana and Strategies to Keep Women and Children Safe from Gender-Based Violence

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## ABSTRACT

Although the tides of the Coronavirus-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic are turning in some parts of the world, the pandemic has exacerbated abusive behavior towards women and children. In Ghana, West Africa, women and children stand a greater chance of experiencing aggravated levels of violence due to cultural considerations. In this commentary, we searched for papers using the keywords “(COVID-19) AND (violence) AND (women and children)” with refining limited to 01-01-2020 to 31-12-2020 on PubMed, Google Scholar, and other websites. A total of 17 and 20 papers from PubMed and other sources, respectively, were included. We found that violence against women and children has worsened in Ghana during the COVID-19 period. The findings call for the need to enhance or build women’s capacity to identify violence, enhance their exposure to available avenues of assistance, and resist the impunity of culprits. Also, the government should strengthen and adequately provide resources for human rights organizations mandated to protect the rights of women and children.

**Keywords:** • COVID-19 • Women • Children • Violence • Ghana • PubMed • Google Scholar • Grey Literature

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## 1. Introduction

The Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has triggered alarming sexual and domestic violence cases against women and children globally.<sup>1,2</sup> Every country is making efforts to limit the spread of the virus, even in the light of COVID-19 vaccinations. Ghana is not an exception and has been adjudged as one of the countries that have well managed the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.<sup>3</sup> This is due to the government’s stringent and appropriate measures to halt the pandemic. Ghana aimed at overcoming the pandemic with five principal objectives: (1) limit and stop the importation of the

virus, (2) contain the spread, (3) offer optimum care for the sick, (4) limit the impact of the virus on social and economic life, and (5) inspire the expansion of domestic capability and deepen self-reliance.<sup>4</sup> The narratives must change within societies and media platforms as part of mitigation strategies of COVID-19 violence against women and children.<sup>5</sup>

Though the impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and children has been established, mitigation strategies targeting women and children against such violence are limited.<sup>1,6</sup> It is reported that the global violence against women stands at 30% and will further increase during COVID-19

lockdowns and other natural disasters.<sup>6</sup> Child abuse is not left out, as there are increased reports of maltreatment from childcare centers.<sup>7,8</sup> To a greater degree, COVID-19 related violence against women affects their psychological well-being, translating to poor parenting at home during the lockdowns.<sup>9</sup> The countries that imposed lockdowns to reduce the contagion rate and avoid a public health crisis became fertile grounds for violence against women and their children globally, especially in Africa.<sup>10</sup> These restrictions (lockdowns) and the fear of contagion changed the daily lives of millions of people worldwide and led to a global economic crisis. These dynamics raised the alert of national authorities and international and civil society organizations, which warned about their possible impacts on the incidence of domestic violence against women and children.<sup>11</sup> In South Africa, for instance, over 2,300 gender-based violence cases were received by the police within the first week of lockdown.<sup>10</sup> For Zimbabwe, the Musasa Project, which is an activist organization, reported 2,768 calls of gender-based cases between March and July 2020, signifying a 70% increase over the calls received within the same period in 2019. Unprecedented sexual and violent cases have been recorded in Ghana's neighboring countries like Nigeria and Liberia.<sup>12</sup> The long- and short-term impacts could serve as lessons for future management strategies.<sup>13</sup> Ghana has also recorded increased violence against women and girls since the COVID-19 pandemic started due to the lockdowns, social distancing measures, and school closures. The International Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV and AIDS (INERELA+) Ghana is reportedly dealing with cases involving multiple forms of violence, including child abuse and exploitation, sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, emotional and economic abuse, femicide and assault by law enforcement agents.<sup>14</sup> Vulnerabilities of children and families have exacerbated during the pandemic since access to social services and criminal justice system is affected. A rapid assessment conducted by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and partners on violence and abuse at home in Ghana during COVID-19 revealed that 32% of adolescents and young people reported

having experienced increased abusive behavior in their families, such as financial (34%), emotional (32%), physical (17%), sexual (10%) and mental/psychological abuses (7%). In addition, 32% of the respondents felt that caregivers maltreated them more than before. Evidence also showed that there is an increase in child abuse cases and a reduction in violence prevention programming (77% decrease), particularly in the Greater Accra and Ashanti Regions of Ghana.<sup>15</sup>

In view of this, the United Nations has acknowledged the adverse impact of COVID-19 on violence and labeled violence against women and girls as a "shadow pandemic."<sup>16</sup> This commentary takes stock of the extent to which COVID-19 has fueled violence against women and children in Ghana and offers innovative approaches and strategies that can be instituted to secure the holistic well-being of women and children during and after the pandemic.

## 2. Methods

We searched for related papers using the keywords "(COVID-19) AND (violence) AND (women and children)" with refining limiting to 01-01-2020 to 31-12-2020 on the PubMed database. In addition, we included grey literature from Google Scholar, websites of relevant organizations such as INERELA+, Delegation of German Industry and Commerce in Ghana, the United Nations (UN), UNICEF, etc. We employed the snowball technique to find other papers regarding COVID-19, women, and children's violence in Ghana. In total, we included 17 papers from PubMed based on the search outcome and 20 papers from other sources to support the discussion.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Impact of COVID-19 Related Violence Against Women in Ghana

Before COVID-19, a greater proportion of women in Ghana had already experienced violence of all forms, and some were reluctant to report them.<sup>17</sup> Common forms of violence experienced by women in Ghana include economic, social, psychological, physical, and sexual violence.<sup>17</sup> Thus, losing jobs and staying at home amidst the pandemic adds to this existing violence and marital problems.<sup>18,19</sup> For

some communities in Northern Ghana, women would prefer to be silent rather than report abuse or violence to the police.<sup>20</sup> A similar situation has been reported by Sifat in 2020, suggesting that many Ghanaian women and their children have been exposed to COVID-19 induced violence without public notice.<sup>21</sup> Public attention is only drawn to these issues through social media, as the majority of the victims rely on social platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) to express their miseries.<sup>22</sup>

Evidence of past health crises shows that violence against women and children is more probable to be a lasting trait of COVID-19.<sup>11</sup> The very idea of this pandemic equally induces pressure on health care systems, particularly in developing countries, concerning post-partum mother-infant actions.<sup>23</sup> COVID-19 induced economic burden on families increases children's risk of child labor, exploitation, and gender-based violence.<sup>24</sup> Even to the extent that the prevalence of the adverse effect of the pandemic is still emerging<sup>25</sup> in light of much false information spreading across online media platforms concerning curing COVID-19.

Ghana observed lockdown and staying home under heightened stress levels, fear, and uncertainty. These are associated with stressful environments that precipitate violence.<sup>23</sup> In Ghana, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted economic activities, particularly for the self-employed, who have been compelled to temporarily halt operations in some instances, thereby increasing the chances of economic violence.<sup>26</sup> Disruption in sources of income has brought about financial and psychological burdens on breadwinners of households. Most of these breadwinners are men, and such happenings translate into amplified tension, resulting in a higher likelihood of violence perpetration against wives and children.<sup>27</sup>

Primary schools were shut down in Ghana until 2021. Removing children from protective environments like schools is reported to increase their exposure to violence.<sup>23,28</sup> Children in the upper primary, junior high school, and senior high school students now interact online due to virtual platforms for learning and socializing. These children

are vulnerable to online grooming, cyberbullying, and sexual exploitation and are at the mercy of predators who intend to take advantage of the pandemic. Absence or reduced face-to-face interaction with teachers, friends, and sometimes parents can enhance the chances of some risks, including increased propensity to access and transmit sexualized videos and pictures.<sup>28</sup> A study showed that about 30.4% of households reported that their children experienced emotional changes, whereas children between 6-and 17 years felt sad more often.<sup>29</sup> This could be attributed to online grooming, cyberbullying, sexual exploitation, and or social distancing measures that deprive children of their respite.

### **3.2. Strategies to Mitigate Violence Against Women and Children Amidst COVID-19**

Several strategies/interventions can be instituted in Ghana to protect women and children from violence of all forms during the COVID-19 era and beyond. Prevention and mitigation initiatives must be integrated across sectors.<sup>30,31</sup> Firstly, there is the need to enhance or build women's capacity to identify violence, enhance their exposure to available avenues of assistance, and resist the impunity of culprits. The government of Ghana, the Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), and all human rights-based organizations, both public and private, need to raise awareness about violence against women and children among the security agencies (e.g., the police) and the public. Media platforms with wide coverage, such as radio, can reach masses of Ghanaians.<sup>32</sup> This should be augmented with print and other electronic avenues to ensure wide coverage. Generally, the media can diffuse gender stereotypes and ensure acceptable masculinity by using fit-for-purpose messages for men. This could subsequently help men develop healthy coping strategies during the pandemics, possible lockdowns, and other stressful situations.<sup>11</sup>

Civil society organizations have a critical role by serving as ambassadors in sensitizing the public, especially women, on available avenues to seek timely assistance on violence. There is a need to strengthen and increase the availability of essential Gender-based violence (GBV) services. There are

several agencies in Ghana mandated to protect the interest of women and children, such as the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU), and Women and Juvenile Unit (WAJU). However, these organizations cannot function effectively due to limited logistics, financial constraints, and political interference.<sup>33,34</sup> COVID-19 has indicated the urgent need for the government of Ghana to support these organizations to function optimally and adequately. The Ministry of Health may prioritize adolescent reproductive health needs (adolescent centers [secluded services for adolescents' reproductive health within health facilities] must be operational and equipped). Also, general practitioners could support their clients to stop using violence via their appointments.<sup>35</sup> There is a need for a synergy between the Social Welfare and Gender Department, National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) and Information Service Department, and Civil Society Organizations to provide education on COVID-19 at the community level.

Parents, teachers, and caregivers ought to make conscious efforts to respond to children's emotional, physical, and educational needs. Every child needs love and a high sense of protection.<sup>36</sup> The government would have to identify organizations that focus on sexual and gender-based violence and reinforce them to be proactive, particularly in the pandemic. As hospitals and clinics deal with infected patients, the health sector could collaborate with gender-based violence organizations to deliver fit-for-purpose services and strengthen referral pathways following the virus' mitigation measures. Through these, both communities and households can be targeted whilst adhering to the COVID-19 protocols.

Government and other relevant stakeholders could support efforts to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 response measures on violence against women and children should be a critical component of pandemic response and recovery.<sup>37,38</sup> Several countries have implemented paid sick leave policies for caregivers, childcare support, and child feeding programs.<sup>39</sup> Other countries have designated violence services as essential, relied

on child helplines to receive violence reports, or integrated child protection into COVID-19 response helplines. Efforts to respond to violence against women, which may benefit children, include altering stay-at-home orders for women experiencing violence, making phone helplines and smartphone apps available inconspicuously, and allowing women to access shelters with their children enabling reporting of violence via pharmacies or supermarkets.<sup>40</sup> These strategic efforts are worth adapting to reduce violence against women and children in Ghana.

### 3.3. Limitations

Since this commentary focused on violence against women and children posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, we were limited to the available scientific and grey literature on the said topic concerning the Ghanaian context. Also, because of time constraints and the issues of social distancing, we could have validated the concerns raised in the literature with interviews with victims to present the extent of violence faced by these women and children.

## 4. Conclusion and Implications for Translation

Considering the devastating implications of COVID-19 in all facets of life, the well-being of women and children cannot be given to chance. Violence against women and children is a critical aspect that requires a conscious and well-coordinated strategy to overcome. In the case of Ghana, strengthening of human rights organizations, strong political will, and synergistic relationship between the health sector, education sector, and human rights centered organizations are required to protect women and children from COVID-19 induced violence of all forms. Relevant policy and actionable research in times of uncertainty can play a crucial role in understanding how to protect these vulnerable populations from violence. We also recommend that the government should resource; Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU), and the Women and Juvenile Unit (WAJU), mandated to protect women and children from delivering on their core duty.

This paper has a number of implications. These include the following: (1) due to cultural considerations, Ghanaian women and their children may have been exposed to COVID-19 induced violence without the public's notice; (2) the media can be utilized to diffuse gender stereotypes and ensure acceptable masculinity by use of fit-for-purpose messages for men; and (3) parents, teachers, and caregivers ought to make conscious efforts at this time to respond to the emotional, physical, and educational needs of children, and build women's capacity to identify violence, enhance their exposure to available avenues of assistance and how to resist impunity of culprits.

### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no competing interests.

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### Key Messages

- ▶ Some women would prefer to be silent than report any abuse or violence to the police or other law enforcement authorities.
- ▶ Building women's capacity to identify violence will enhance their exposure to available avenues of assistance and to seek those out when needed.
- ▶ Parents, teachers, and caregivers should be empowered to make deliberate efforts at this time to respond to the emotional, physical, and educational needs of children.

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