



Statement by the SADC Executive Secretary, H.E. Dr Stergomena Lawrence Tax on Covid-19 and Gender Based Violence and Domestic Violence

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Since the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, cases of domestic violence have been rising significantly across the globe, particularly following the lockdown measures instituted by Governments to contain the spread of the virus. Clearly, the SADC Region has not been spared. The UN Women report shows that some countries around the world, particularly those highly affected by COVID-19, have registered up to 30% increase in reported domestic violence cases and around 33% increase in emergency calls for gender-based violence, with women and girls being the victims of these acts.

The situation is not only appalling, but stands against the very spirit and principles enshrined in the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, Regional Strategy and Framework of Action for Addressing GBV (2018-2030) and the Regional Strategy on Women, Peace and Security (2018 – 2022), which collectively seek to sustainably empower and protect women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence.

SADC recognises that, in the midst of combating this unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, it is easy to overlook the abuses that women and girls encounter during this crisis. While it is very important for Governments and stakeholders to focus on measures to contain COVID-19, and Law enforcement establishments to focus on enforcing COVID-19 regulations and measures in the communities, domestic violence should not be neglected.

Under the lockdown, domestic violence cases tend to increase as security, health, and finance concerns heighten socio-economical tensions. Women that have been in abusive relationships are now forced to be at home with their abusers for a prolonged period, making it difficult for them to reach out for help due to the presence of the abusive partner at home. Social distancing in itself makes it difficult for women victims to reach out to their usual support systems, particularly, friends and other family members. In addition, the COVID-19 quarantine centres and temporary accommodation facilities for the homeless have the potential of being a breeding ground for sexual and gender-based violence, if not managed appropriately.

The pandemics like COVID-19 can make reporting of abuses harder due to the disruption of public services and limited access to communication facilities such as

phones and helplines. It is therefore important for the Member States to provide flexible and innovative tools for reporting, counselling services, and support to domestic violence. These tools must be clearly communicated to enable those affected to access and utilise them. In response to this crisis, particularly during lockdown, shelters and places of safety for victims of abuse must be considered an essential service and should be expanded as needed. This is in line with Article 20 of the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, which obliges Member States to put in place measures to eliminate gender-based violence. Implementation of this provision is guided by the Regional Strategy and Framework of Action for Addressing Gender Based Violence (2018-2030) and the Regional Strategy on Women, Peace and Security (2018 – 2022), which collectively seek to sustainably empower and protect women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence.

May we all - public sector, private sector, civil society, media and community leaders to work together during the COVID-19 crisis, while considering the differential impact of the crisis on women and men, boys and girls. With collective efforts and commitment, we can avoid a double crisis of COVID-19 and gender-based violence, and the associated far reaching consequences to our society. We must all redouble our efforts on zero tolerance to gender-based violence as we fight this devastating COVID-19 pandemic.