



Women in Masvingo struggling to access health facilities..... highlight unaffordable price of sanitary pads

Women from Masvingo who are part of CAATs (file photo)

Women who are part of Heal Zimbabwe Community Action Accountability Teams (CAATs) in Bikita, Zaka and Gutu have raised alarm over the challenges being faced by women in the three districts. As part of raising awareness on Covid 19, the women created Virtual Information Centres where community members discuss topical issues affecting their communities.

Community members highlighted that they are facing challenges in accessing quality services from health facilities due to issues of long distance travel. Before the ban on commuter transport, women were used to commuting to nearest clinics which in most cases would be a distance of more than 10km.

In Bikita women, including expecting mothers are travelling a distance of about 5-6km to access Mungei clinic. In most cases women have been turned away due to the unavailability of drugs and been referred to Nyika hospital which is 10km away.

The plight of expecting mothers has also been worsened by an increase in transport costs that has seen the available transport charging as much as ZW\$20-40 to get to Nyika Growth Point.

In Zaka, Jerera satellite clinic is only attending to emergency cases and not conducting any pregnancy

check-ups for women. This has resulted in many women giving birth in their homes without specialised care.

A case in point is of one woman who was turned away from St Antony hospital after being told by health personnel that she still had weeks before her delivery. The following day, she delivered at her home without any specialised care. In Gutu, women also highlighted a shortage in contraceptive pills with most clinics in the district highlighting that they have run of stock.

Other issues raised by women include the high price for sanitary pads. In Gutu, shops were charging as much as ZW\$65 for a packet of sanitary pads while some shops in Bikita are even demanding as much as US\$2. This is besides the fact that recently, government scrapped excise duty on sanitary pads.

In light of this, Heal Zimbabwe implores government to put in place policies, laws and resources for the right to basic health care to be enjoyed in Zimbabwe in compliance with Section 76 (1,2,3,4) of the constitution.

The virtual Information centres by Heal Zimbabwe are an initiative meant to equip communities with relevant information on Covid 19, facilitate local level conversations on pertinent issues affecting communities as well as create socially cohesive communities.

# Local Communities express concern over high price of face masks

Community members from Buhera, Mutasa, and Chivi have expressed concern over the high price of face masks. Following the announcement by President Emerson Mnangagwa on 1 May 2020, that people must wear face masks of any type, even home-made cloth ones, local communities have noted that local businesses have hiked the price of masks due to high demand.



The price of masks is now beyond the reach of many (Pic credit,VOA)

In Districts such as Buhera, Chivi and Mutasa, face masks are pegged between US\$1-US\$6 depending on the quality. In areas such as Headlands and Chimanimani, homemade masks are pegged between ZW\$20-25. Speaking in Virtual information centers established by communities that work with Heal Zimbabwe from these districts, community members highlighted that the sharp rise in face masks were inhibitive on the economic life of communities as they are unable to access services at Business centers and growth points.

“We are unable to access key goods services from Business centers without face masks. Our food supplies have dried up and without face masks we cannot even buy basic commodities” said one community member from Chimanimani. Other community members highlighted that police officers at most business centers are turning away people without proper face masks from business centers.

Besides the cost of masks, community members also noted that they were not aware of the proper and safe way of wearing face masks. As part of solutions, communities resolved to take the matter up with their local leaders such as Councillors so that government can ensure that face masks are given for free.

Community members also resolved to engage Village Health Workers so that they train and educate communities on the proper and safe way of wearing face masks. The Virtual Information Centers by Heal Zimbabwe are an initiative meant to equip communities with relevant information on Covid 19, facilitate local level conversations on pertinent issues affecting communities as well as create socially cohesive communities.

## Zimbabwe can beat COVID-19 through Human Rights Protection

The Zimbabwean government, like any other government in the world is struggling to contain the covid-19 pandemic. Every country, from the developed north to the developing South have all put measures to stop the corona virus scourge. However, only when minimum, but sufficient, human rights measures are upheld to the maximum that the pandemic will subside and ultimately disappear. The Bill of Rights in the Constitution of Zimbabwean can help beating COVID-19.

Other rights will be forgone, such as the right to freedom of assembly and association, to enforce social distancing which is essential in preventing community transmission. Social distancing is one critical prevention mechanism. However, the right to food, the right to safe

and clean water, the right to healthcare and the right to be protected from discrimination, among other rights are essential agencies to beat the COVID-19 pandemic. For Zimbabwe, the constitution upholds these rights explicitly in the Bill of Rights; hence, the government’s failure to meet its constitutional obligations, alone, is an emergency response failure to COVID-19.

The Heal Zimbabwe Trust, Zimbabwe Human Rights Association, the Zimbabwe NGO Forum, and the Zimbabwe Peace Project, among other civic organizations in Zimbabwe have observed the government’s failure to uphold human rights in response to COVID-19. For example, on;

The Right to food and water – Section 77 of the constitution guarantees the right to sufficient food and safe, clean and portable water.

However, the government declared the lockdown without putting in place safety nets that enable citizens to have adequate and full access to food. In search of food, people continue queuing in shops and markets without observing social distancing, which poses a serious health threat. Mealie-meal, for instance, remains in short supply and when available people fight for the little and in the process forget the importance of maintaining a distance on one metre as recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Joined with the right to food is the right to water– hand washing and good personal hygiene, at all times, is an essential condition to combat the COVID-19 pandemic across the world. However, in Zimbabwe access to water is a struggle which literally implies a national response failure to address the corona virus prevention measures. In Harare and its surrounding dormitory towns of Chitungwiza and Norton, for example, communities have gone for months without access to clean and safe water.

This means average families that cannot afford buying water are at risk of contracting COVID-19 because literally they cannot exercise good personal hygiene as required. Only if the Government of Zimbabwe had considered ensuring that all Zimbabweans have access to sufficient food and safe, clean and portable water that people will respect both social distancing and the #StayHome lockdown conditions

The right to information – disinformation and lack of access to accurate and timely information could lead to increased community infections and multiple deaths. The Zimbabwean government has curtailed the disclosure of COVID-19 from health institutions and local councils, observes the Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZimRights).

The extent of deaths and infections magnitude of COVID-19 must be known by all citizens, not only because the Constitution upholds the right accurate information, but also because if there is adequate information to citizens high social consciousness emerges, which allows people to prevent community infections



File pic ,Source:UN news

and improve protection by adhering to best practices as recommended by the government itself and the WHO, in response to the pandemic. As such, respecting section 61 of the constitution providing for the right to freedom of expression and freedom of the media is essential to beating COVID-19.

The Right to health care – when all citizens have access to healthcare it becomes easy for the infected to come forward for testing and self-quarantine accordingly.

Those infected by the corona virus deserve urgent access to healthcare without discrimination as required by section 76 of the constitution. Section 76 indicates that every Zimbabwean has the right to access basic healthcare services and none should be refused emergency medical treatment at any health institution yet COVID-19 patients are often turned away from public institutions and forced to self-quarantine and treat themselves. Access to private health facilities is just extremely expensive in Zimbabwe.

The government owned health institutions such as the Wilkins Hospital meant to handle COVID-19 cases is ill-equipped and being there is a death trap, as was the case with Zororo Makamba. This alone means the poor, if infected, will by no means enjoy the right to healthcare. Besides the COVID-19 patients the medical staffs itself is vulnerable to the diseases given the poor state of public health institutions.

Only if the government respects the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of Zimbabwe, that the country will be a step closer to beating the COVID-19 pandemic. Zimbabwe is going through a severe economic crisis that if Human Rights are not respected, the poor will be hit hard by the corona virus. It is appreciated, however, that in time of emergencies all rights that are a pedestal to fighting natural calamities may be forgone. Zimbabwe's Constitution is the key tool to beat COVID-19.

# Local communities bemoan lack of adequate information on Covid -19



A local community discuss issues of peace and reconciliation (File pic)

Community members who are part of Heal Zimbabwe’s virtual information centers from Matabeleland, Masvingo, Manicaland and Mashonaland east and central have expressed concern over the inaccessibility of information on the novel corona virus. The virtual information centers by Heal Zimbabwe were established to bridge the information gap in local communities on covid, rally communities in the fight against Covid-19 and create platforms for communities to engage on other issues affecting communities.

Topical among issues raised on these platforms include lack of adequate information on Covid 19. Community members noted that in most cases this was due to poor radio signal reception and mobile network coverage. Due to these challenges, communities are unable to receive near real time updates on Covid 19 and other preventative measures guidelines. In most cases, communities are left at the mercy of chain messages on social media platforms such as Whatsapp that more than often are usually false and misleading. Community members proposed that government must decentralize information on Covid 19 and ensure that key information on this deadly virus reaches even remote districts.

Added to this, community members also noted that local Village Health Workers while they have been helpful in encouraging hygienic practices in local communities, they also have limited information on the virus. One example cited was how Village Health Workers are unable to provide accurate statistical data on cases recorded in the country. In most cases, the statistics that they usually have are usually incorrect or would have been overtaken by events.

As part of way forward, communities highlighted that government through the responsible Ministry is supposed to conduct robust training for health workers on corona virus and other home based care practices that help to prevent further corona infections within communities. The virtual Information centers by Heal Zimbabwe are an initiative meant to equip communities with relevant information on Covid 19, facilitate local level conversations on pertinent issues affecting communities as well as create socially cohesive communities.