Gendered Voices
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Gendered Voices draws on women’s experiences during the confinement period in Mauritius to highlight the gendered implications of COVID-19. During the lockdown period, women have been unable to leave their homes to seek help, as revealed by a comparative drop in the reported cases of domestic violence at the level of the Police. From Lisa’s survival story and her journey of self-empowerment, to insights from the Police, Government, Media Outlets and Shelter Administrators, this Issue showcases experiences around addressing gender based violence during the confinement period.

Focus on Gender Based Violence

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Message from...
Amanda K. Serumaga
UNDP Resident Representative – Mauritius and Seychelles

As with most things, a crisis is experienced and understood in a myriad of ways that are informed by gender, economic standing and other factors. When COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, the immediate and clear concerns were rightly about public health, stemming the spread and finding a vaccine. As public policy and health measures such as national lockdowns took hold, then came gendered voices, speaking to the many ways in which women were and continue to experience the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like others, women began to tell their stories, locally and globally. Stories of their resilience and agency in the face of lost wages and new opportunities; of their vulnerability as ageing women when faced with isolation during lockdown; and of surviving domestic violence and finding safe spaces. We listened to the stories of working women sharing the ways in which they found new balance, adapted; and for some, continued to be resilient in the face of employment inequality.

The United Nations Development Programme in Mauritius partnered with the Ministry of Gender and Social Welfare, the Australian High Commission, the Office of the UN Resident Coordinator and UN Women to contribute a space to document women’s COVID-19 stories in Mauritius. The Gendered Voices Newsletter aims to illustrate the intersectionality of women’s identities and experiences; to contribute to our understanding of effective policy responses and, to quite simply, add to the echo of their voices.

Following the Gendered Voices – COVID-19 series, the newsletter will continue to gather and share women’s voices across a spectrum of issues and contexts. And in so doing, continue to affirm “Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world ... Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.” (Eleanor Roosevelt)

Amanda K. Serumaga
UNDP Resident Representative
Mauritius and Seychelles

Date: January 2021
Focus on Gender Based Violence
Gendered Voices draws on women’s experiences during the confinement period in Mauritius to highlight the gendered implications of COVID-19.

During the lockdown period, women have been unable to leave their homes to seek help, as revealed by a comparative drop in the reported cases of domestic violence at the level of the Police. From Lisa’s survival story and her journey of self-empowerment, to insights from the Police, Government, Media Outlets and Shelter Administrators, this Issue showcases experiences around addressing gender based violence during the confinement period.
Message from...
Hon. (Mrs) Kalpana Devi Koonjoo-Shah.
Minister of Gender Equality and Family Welfare

It is with much appreciation that I am associated with this first edition of the UNDP newsletter, which comes at an opportune moment, whereby efforts from all quarters are to be pulled together in addressing the impact of the COVID-19 on our society.

I wish, at the very outset, to acknowledge the tremendous support and the active collaboration of the UNDP to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare, in its quest for gender equality.

This initiative is to be commended as I firmly believe that this newsletter will serve as an effective tool in reaching out to all stakeholders, thus enabling the sharing of pertinent information and resources regularly and efficiently regarding policies/projects and interventions geared towards realizing the set objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals.

As National Gender Machinery, my Ministry will capitalize on this opportunity to showcase our achievements as well as vehicle relevant information on issues of women’s empowerment and gender equality.

At this juncture, I wish to highlight that my Ministry and the UNDP have been strategic partners in implementing several flagship initiatives. To name a few:

(i) The formulation of a National Gender Policy for 2019 – 2029 which articulates key strategies to be implemented by the Government and non-state actors in realizing the set objectives of Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals;

(ii) The technical support and financial assistance provided to all Ministries in the development of their sectoral gender policy statements;

(iii) The conduct of high level capacity building programmes on gender mainstreaming; and

(iv) The implementation of the L.E.A.D Project which aims at having a pool of trainers who will be equipped with skills required for conducting training programmes on leadership for women.

Notwithstanding the above, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has indeed impacted significantly on women and even the progress made so far, as women’s empowerment and gender equality are at risk of being rolled back. The pandemic has indeed deepened existing inequalities and has brought to light vulnerabilities in our social, political and economic systems.

I am confident that with the know-how of the UNDP, including its intensive work in gender equality and women’s empowerment, my Ministry will be able to consolidate its interventions through the development of realistic, achievable and timely responses and measures geared towards recovery in addressing the impacts of COVID-19.

Hon. (Mrs) Kalpana Devi Koonjoo-Shah
Minister of Gender Equality and Family Welfare
During Lisa’s 14 years of marriage, she has been subjected to diverse forms of physical, psychological, verbal and economic violence. In a bid to break silence over the issue and as a cornerstone to her empowerment, Lisa shares her experience of domestic violence during COVID-19.

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Only three days into the lockdown, began the insults. My husband discarded my plea for dialogue to understand his fit of anger. Instead, he threw my clothes on the floor and threatened to kill me if I did not leave home immediately! Out of fear, I gathered some clothes and left. He kicked me on my arm, on my way out.

I was unaware of the emergency hotline. With my cousin who is also a victim of domestic violence, we went to a friend’s place but one day later, we were ordered to leave without any specific reason. We were stranded.

We went to the nearby police station. Once there, we were reprimanded for having left because of the curfew. We were re-directed to another police station, where a male police officer tried his utmost to help. He called various shelters, but we needed proof of being tested negative for COVID-19 to get into a shelter. We did not have that certificate, and went to the hospital to try and get the test. As we had no sanitary protection, we feared going in and being exposed to the virus.

But, I still needed help to treat my injured leg, so we went inside. I informed the Staff of our situation and a helpful female acquaintance arranged for us to obtain the COVID test in another hospital. When we reached there, a temperature check was done, but, we could not get the COVID-19 test perhaps because we were asymptomatic, and we appeared healthy to the Doctors.

Without the COVID-19 test, we were not able to access the Shelter. That angered me. I realized then... it was all hopeless. On top of that, I was exhausted. We had not eaten or drunk for days but for was a carton of juice at a police station days ago. The lack of food and drink triggered a severe migraine. I had no choice, but to go back to my abusive husband. Back home, I told him that I had filed an official complaint against him at the Police Station. This is my 6th filed complaint. He is aware that he might go to jail this time. He tried to play with my emotions and manipulate me. He said “How will you live without me”, knowing that I am unemployed and financially depend on him.

But this time, I said no to him: No. No more!

I took legal actions. Regardless of whether he goes to jail or not, I plan to be financially independent with the help of my family. I am a strong woman. I grew up witnessing my mother getting hit by my father. They separated. But then came my turn in my abusive marriage. I thank my strong mother who always advises me to never accept violence.

The time has come.”
SUPPORTING VICTIMS – THE EXPERIENCE OF SHELTERS

As mentioned in Lisa’s story, with the announcement of the sanitary curfew, a number of Shelters in Mauritius closed down to new admissions of women victims of domestic violence.

Without an alternative relocation strategy or safety plan in place, the consequential implications for victims encompassed further isolation in households and exposure to heightened risk of violence.

Domestic Violence Shelter Director, Mrs. A. Jeanne of SOS Femmes, one of the oldest Shelter in operation in Mauritius, reflects on her experience of operating the Shelter during lockdown. She states:

… the premises of SOS Femme Shelter are not logistically engineered to offer quarantine facilities as per requisite sanitary norms. We continue to receive calls every day, all from women in sheer distress with no alternatives. In our limited capacity, we channel victims to the police. In some cases, the police have issued a warning against the perpetrators. Our lawyer is also at their disposal if they need advice on protection order. Our psychologist is offering counseling. But the primary problem remains: the victims are stuck at home with the perpetrators. They even run greater risk when they call us for help. And we cannot call them back. What if the abuser picks up the phone?

This could trigger more violence...
The underlying problem is that these women are having to try to speak while being confined at home with their abusive partner. We refrain from calling them, lest the partner answers the phone. We let the victims call us instead.

Mrs. A. Jeanne further explains that the lockdown has accentuated power and control dynamics at home, whereby victims are isolated and monitored by their abusers. The risk factors and triggers to domestic violence are also exacerbated. In terms of financial independence, she explains:

There should be suitable accommodation facilities put in place to accommodate people from different socio-economic backgrounds, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many times, women have nowhere to go after their time spent in our shelter. There needs to be a ‘reconstructive’ plan. Not everyone has recourse to the National Housing Development Co. Ltd. (Government Housing). Single mothers who work cannot afford to pay for expensive childcare. With the minimum wage, they cannot afford everything they need when they are single mothers with several kids: accommodation, bills, food etc. The minimum wage also does not make them eligible for other forms of governmental financial help. They need to be helped financially as there is only one salary upholding the household.

In addition to economic challenges, Mrs A. Jeanne explains that women are faced with cultural considerations and childcare responsibilities and their
caring roles that makes leaving abusive relationships and Shelters difficult.

…Moving forward, the root causes of violence need to be tackled. We need a reconstructive plan, especially in the scope of economic empowerment of victims...

We cannot tell Victim to leave because they do not have an earning. We also try not to keep an individual for more than six months as this does not counterproductive for their own self-empowerment and reconstruction. But here in Mauritius, we do not have this culture of living alone, especially for women. After living with their parents, they move in with their, most of the time, married partners. Women fear a lot, especially if their abusive partners try to come find them when they live on their own... Children are also affected. We do not want to turn anyone away, but we have to, for the safety of our current children against COVID. We have had to stop visits too—Many women in our center suffer from not seeing their children.”

Mrs. A. Jeanne explains that having an external multi-function area would have helped in terms of serving as a quarantine facility to accommodate new arrivals pending the confirmation of test results for COVID-19. She concludes by sharing a message to all women, especially the younger generation:

“...Young girls romanticise... They need to watch out for signs of control, such as jealousy which may be confused with “real love”. Young girls need to be empowered to feel free and respected, and know the signs of abusive and disrespectful relationships...We need to teach children from a young age about gender equality...”
INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

(I) POLICE FAMILY PROTECTION UNIT

Woman Chief Inspector (WCI), Mrs S. Rajiah has over 20 years of experience in the Police Force. She reports that COVID-19 is indeed unprecedented and has led to a realignment of the existing strategies at the level of the Police Family Protection Unit (PFPU) to attend to cases of domestic violence in the community.

She states:

“We developed a strategy to keep in touch with victims who reported cases of violence in 2019 and 2020. I asked my units to engage with both victims and perpetrators daily via the phone. This is to give a reassuring police presence and support, especially for the safety and psychological wellbeing of victims stuck at home...and...for some perpetrators, isolation has brought back childhood memories of violence, weakened their mental health and have been triggers to perpetuating the cycle of violence in their own families during lockdown. Whilst the PFPU reports that it has deployed all Officers at the community levels, challenges still remain in terms of having a solid framework for action during confinement/lockdown periods.”

WCI Rajiah highlights that:

“...Mauritius has no set Protocol of Assistance to Victims in times of restricted movement/curfews or in pandemic situations...Some women braved the lockdown restrictions to file official reports at the Police Station of their locality. The PFPU took the initiative to contact victims who had submitted past reports of domestic violence abuse to check on their safety. Perpetrators were also contacted to provide them with coping mechanism during the lock-down... As part of their reaching out strategy, the PFPU organised online counselling sessions with separated parents to address breaches of child custody legal requirements and request for child care allowances to be paid by Fathers to enable the provision of basic necessities to children under custody.”
One of the challenges the PFPU faced was that victims felt isolated within the confines of their homes, with no outside physical access to help. She invites policymakers to rethink the ways in which counselling is provided. According to her, the setting up on a 24-hour online interactive platform between victims and professional psychologists would be helpful during such difficult times. Police Constable Rajiah asserts that:

“If there is something that COVID-19 has shown us is that we need to strengthen our preparedness plan to respond to pandemics and confinements impacting on women’s safety and that of children in dangerous settings... The PFPU will adapt and respond to emerging challenges identified to create a safer community for vulnerable groups... The PFPU will continue to be at the forefront of reaching out to vulnerable groups in the community.”

As at May 2020, the PFPU reports that it has intervened in more than 1100 reported cases of GBV. WCI Rajiah asserts that asserts that her Unit will continue safeguarding the community through its mobile response units.

(II) MINISTRY OF GENDER EQUALITY AND FAMILY WELFARE

The Hotline (139) of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare continued to be in operation during the lockdown for reporting of cases of domestic violence. It is reported that the Hotline was overflown with calls for counselling and reporting of cases but all cases were attended to. In spite of the lockdown, the Ministry reports that it extended psychological counselling and legal advice over the phone and in some instances reported cases to the Police, or assisted in the drafting of Affidavits for Survivors submitting such applications by Whatsapp to the Office of the Director of Public Prosecution. Given that there was strict restriction of movement, the Ministry facilitated “Work Access Permits” to enable Officers working at Shelters to continue their operation.

As unprecedented times require unprecedented measures, the Ministry leveraged on video conferencing facilities to submit an application for a one-year Protection Order for a Victim via video conference and in a second instance, a Protection Order was extended for another victim. Given the challenging times, the Ministry reports that it managed to do the needful to place three women survivors and six accompanying children in a half-way home. In total, the Ministry’s hotline attended to 349 reports of domestic violence, in cases where survivors were able to notify the Authorities.
MEDIA REPORTING ON GENDER BASED VIOLENCE DURING CONFINEMENT

Since the beginning of the lock-down, Mauritian media outlets (written press, radio, television and social media) have reported on domestic violence in a number of ways, namely, (i) by reporting on violence being perpetrated against women; (ii) by sensitising the public at large on strengthening family ties through TV campaigns on harmonious families; (iii) by educating the public on how to recognise signs of GBV; (iv) by raising the alarm on challenges for women to report cases of domestic violence; and (v) advised on the channels for reporting cases. The media has contributed towards a paradigm shift from keeping violence as a private issue to ending the culture of silence shrouding domestic violence.

From 12 April to 15 May 2020, ten press articles, written both by males and females, appeared from different media houses with most cases victims identifying themselves as female. Three articles reported violence against children with one article centered on violence against an elderly woman. The most prevalent topic of gender based violence remained physical and sexual violence, sequestration, and the risk factors and triggers to domestic violence (such as alcohol abuse, and excessive...
anger). Other forms of gender-based violence did not make the headlines, but for one with the violent killing of a woman following theft.

Fictive pictures or that of the perpetrator were mainly used to illustrate reports on gender-based violence. No photographs of victims were published. Visuals (pictures accompanied by bold sensationalist headlines) remained important attention grabbers. Categories of photos that accompanied the texts were either pixelated, or showed the scene of violence. Photos used did not portray explicit details of specific acts of violence, rather were broader description. Photographs were presented in two ways, either (i) showed the victim clearly or the perpetrator or a reporter on the topic; or (ii) were accompanied by either a photo not necessarily revealing the victim’s face – rather the article contained general pictures that lead the mind to frame the picture as a situation of domestic violence.

Using national television and radio as a platform for mass sensitisation, the Minister of Gender Equality and Family Welfare held a Press Conference during prime time to inform that the Ministry will sustain its services to assist victims of domestic violence and called upon all families to live harmoniously during testing times. It was reported that the Hotline had responded to 349 cases of gender-based violence during the period 20 March and 13 May 2020.6

A sensitisation campaign created by an Alliance of NGOs also featured regularly at prime time on television in an attempt to break the culture of silence surrounding domestic violence.

**In conclusion...**

To many victims of domestic violence, the ability to leave an abusive relationship is a matter of life or death for them and their children. The strict lockdown measures, while being a necessity to contain the pandemic, have left victims and survivors confined with their perpetrators. Without a form of external quarantine facility in place to temporarily accommodate victims in line with sanitary protocols, the Shelter featured in this Issue has had no alternative but to prioritise the safety of their current residents from the risk of contagion in spite of the high demands for Shelter accommodation. Concurrently, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare has also reported a high volume of call on its hotline and has sustained its services to victims, with the support of the Police. SOS Femmes also reports that it has provided free legal advice and psychological counselling by Professionals to victims/survivors.

Responding to gender-based violence matters during COVID-19 has called for a paradigm shift in the way that service delivery was effected prior to lockdown. The Ministry of Gender Equality has leveraged on technology to liaise with the Office of the Director of Public Prosecution for victim/survivor safety. The Police Family Protection Unit has continued its operation at the community level by checking on victims and perpetrators in their existing database. Media outlets have generated constant information on gender-based violence during the lockdown. The Hotline service administered by the Ministry of Gender Equality was vastly diffused via radio, television, social media and printed news editions. National television also broadcasted an awareness campaign on harmonious families and recognising the signs of violence.

There has been a holistic approach with innovative strategies to address gender-based violence in Mauritius. However, as the narratives featured in this Issue have shown, there remain challenges to be addressed to build back better.

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The COVID-19 health crisis is having a devastating effect on the socioeconomic life of many countries across the world. The International Labour Organisation estimates that around 25 million people will lose their jobs as a direct or indirect result of the pandemic. Moreover, the International Monetary Fund foresees a contraction of 3% of the World Gross Domestic Product (GDP), with a predicted contraction of around 11% for Mauritius in 2020.

In Mauritius, COVID-19 policy responses to assist vulnerable groups have been multi-faceted. These include a wages assistance scheme to help employees of the private and informal sectors. The Budget Speech of 4 June 2020 notes that creation and sustaining jobs for women and men is a key component of the 2020-2021 Budget. It is likely that the compounded socioeconomic impact of the pandemic will have a disproportionate effect on women as they already face entrenched forms of gender inequalities and economic disadvantages.

According to the UNDP Gender Position Paper (2020), the pandemic may threaten the fragile gains made towards achieving SDG 5 (Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment). Gendered Voices Issue 2 focuses on the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic has imposed on the female workforce in Mauritius. Through the voices of women occupying positions in different sectors, this second edition provides an indiscriminate glimpse of the courage and resilience that they have shown in managing both paid and unpaid work during the lockdown period.
Message from …
Ms. Christine N. Umutoni.
United Nations Resident Coordinator for Mauritius and Seychelles

In 2020 as the United Nations turns 75, we also mark the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action and launch the call for a DECADE OF ACTION, 10 years to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and implement Agenda 2030. Goal number 5 on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment is central to the SDGs; and reminds us that fighting discrimination against women and girls is not only a matter of human rights but a prerequisite for sustainable development.

This was intended to be a ground-breaking year for gender equality, a period of reflection on gains and recommitting to accelerate the SDGs. However, as I write these few words, countries around the world are struggling with a deep shock, with COVID-19 affecting economies and societies at their core.

Evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic will affect women’s economic lives, disproportionately and differently from men. The UN Secretary-General’s policy brief entitled “The Impact of COVID-19 on Women”, shows that there is a negative impact of the pandemic on women and girls. Across the globe, women earn less, hold less secure jobs, are more likely to work in the informal sector, and have less access to social protections.

UNDP and UN WOMEN studies have shown that women earn only 77 cents for every dollar that men get for the same work, 35% of women have experienced physical or sexual violence and women represent only 13% of agricultural landholding. It follows that women’s capacity to absorb economic shocks is, therefore, less than that of men, which poses the risk that gender gaps will widen during and after the pandemic.

Additionally, according to recent studies by UNCTAD and ILO, the economic contraction of tourism to SIDS is likely to hit women hard. Under the economic pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic, enterprises are inclined to first lay off workers in low-skilled, casual, seasonal and informal jobs while keeping those in high-skilled or permanent positions. For example, ILO predicts that, given that women are highly represented in the tourism sector in mostly low-skilled activities, they are most likely to experience job loss in Small Island Developing States. In Mauritius it is estimated that over 40% workers in accommodation, food sources and administrative activities are women.

The pandemic has exposed the lack of investment in many areas like gender equality, which are fundamental to sustainable, resilient and inclusive economies.

“Limited gains in gender equality and women’s rights made over the decades are in danger of being rolled back due to the COVID-19 pandemic.”

The UN Secretary General has urged governments to put women and girls at the centre of their recovery efforts. Every COVID-19 response plan, and every recovery package and budget needs to address the gender impacts
of the pandemic. This means: (1) including women and women’s organizations in COVID-19 response planning and decision-making; (2) transforming the inequities of unpaid care work into a new, inclusive care economy that works for everyone; and (3) designing socio-economic plans with an intentional focus on the lives and futures of women and girls.

Mauritius is commended for being among countries which are leading in the fight to contain the pandemic. Women have done their part as frontline workers. The UN Deputy Secretary General has initiated the “Women Rise for All”- a platform to shine a light on and recognize women’s extraordinary front-line leadership that is winning against COVID-19.

In the same spirit, I am pleased to introduce the second edition of the Gendered Voices Newsletter by UNDP Mauritius- inspiring stories of Mauritian women who have demonstrated their capacity of recovery and shown a remarkable resilience during the past few months.

The crisis and the recovery-related investments present an opportunity to renew the 2030 global development agenda – giving true meaning to the concept of #BuildBackBetter. Including women in the recovery process is a bold decision and is a means to build resilient and equal societies, and a better future for everyone.
COVID-19: INCREASING INEQUALITIES BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN

COVID-19 has the potential to increase the feminisation of poverty in Mauritius. Presently, 11% of the poorer segment of the population consists of women living under the poverty line, compared to 9.6% males in this category. According to the World Bank, there is already a gender pay gap of 28% in the private sector and 23.4% gender pay gap across different occupational levels. With the high representation of women in sectors that have been hit the hardest by the pandemic, such as the hospitality industry and tertiary sectors, left unaddressed their situation can only worsen.

According to the UNDP Human Development Report, 2019, women have attained higher education levels than their male counterparts both in the public and private sectors. Notwithstanding, in the first quarter of 2020, women comprised 57% of the unemployed.

Concurrently, a World Bank Group Study (2018) provides an analysis of the barriers to women’s participation in employment noting that amongst one of the challenges faced by women in employment is that they continue to bear the brunt of household work and are at the heart of the care economy.

The results in opting out of activities that “compete for women’s time and energy with work on the labor market and might force women to look for less competitive and less remunerative career paths and greater flexibility at work”.

The choice of careers that women enter impact on their abilities to access jobs that are compatible with their care obligations and in turn impact on the level of inequality within households.

The COVID-19 reality and impact, present the risk that gender-neutral policies and interventions may exacerbate inequalities between women and men. The UNDP Policy Briefing Note on “The Gendered Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Mauritius Context” calls for policies aimed at easing women’s care roles while concurrently putting in place mechanisms to support women who continue in these roles. Furthermore, the World Bank welcomes initiatives to encourage men be more actively involved in the household.

“Subsidized child and elderly care and work-time regulations that promote flexibility and facilitate part-time work may be effective... Extending paternity leave and making it more flexible is an additional instrument aimed at easing the burden borne by women and reducing the cost of hiring women.” – World Bank, 2018
**Figure 1:** Educational Distribution of Female Wage Workers by educational attainment in the private sector  
*Source: World Bank Group*

**Figure 2:** Educational Distribution of Male Wage Workers by educational attainment, in the private sector  
*Source: World Bank Group*

**Figure 3:** Choices, Markets, and Institutions Affect Labor Income. World Bank Group, 2018.  
*Source: World Bank Group*
Swany’s vision of sustainable food production

Swany, 31-year old, is used to working in a male-dominated industry. In 2016, out of her passion for nature, she quit working in the construction sector to start a career in hydroponic farming. With no prior background in agriculture, Swany had to rapidly learn about her new field while running her new business. The young hydroponic farmer launched her SME in 2018, and found that her burgeoning enthusiasm was rapidly tested by high investment costs with no guarantee of immediate success. Taken in the storm of the pandemic, Swany shares her challenging journey.

“To launch a business venture in agriculture is very risky. To pursue a chemical-free hydroponics farming system is doubly risky. Due to Climate Change – including torrential rains, increased humidity, and heatwaves – and crop diseases, I experienced poor yields just prior to...
COVID-19. That resulted in significant financial loss. I was expecting better results in March, with more favorable temperatures and conditions for cultivation and harvest. Unfortunately, it coincided with the advent of COVID-19 and lockdown measures. The first two weeks of the lockdown brought a complete halt to my work. I had to give away crops to avoid wastage. My Planter’s Card enabled me to get a Work Access Permit, but unfortunately, my three employees were not allowed to resume work. I was thus left alone to manage three greenhouses, each fostering around 800 plants. It was exhausting!

While harvest was slacking off on my side, restaurants closed and supermarkets curbed demand as they feared another total lockdown. Agricultural crops are perishable goods, I therefore had to find new clients through online marketing to avoid further losses. Many other planters lost a great deal of crops to robbery or rotting in the fields. Some of them, who were used to relying upon intermediate merchants, had no transport facilities to deliver or sell products. Hence, I helped out with vegetable delivery, while attending to my own business. In the aftermath of COVID-19 and lockdown, I went short of essential imported raw materials like Cocopeats due to import complications and shop closures. I foresee a meagre harvest, but I remain positive.

Swany is confident that the local agricultural sector will diversify and take advantage of new technologies. She encourages women in the agribusiness sector to invest in mechanisation and to use innovative farming techniques.

It is about time we rethink and diversify our agricultural sector through sustainable practices. We are at the cusp of innovation with controlled farming and production systems like hydroponics. For such technologies to have a substantive impact on local food production and food security, the government’s support for adoption is key. Subsistence farming needs to be endorsed by Mauritians too. Unprofitable sugarcane land can be put at the disposal of young farmers and be converted into other cash crops. Producing our own staple food, like flour from manioc and breadfruit, is more viable for long-term benefits. Ultimately, we need to redress the current food supply model, which features 80% of imported food, and encourage the production of food locally.”
After years of intense labour and exhausting commuting to a tuna factory, Fabiola resolved to set up a women’s handicraft business association in 2003. Motivated by the will to bring work closer to home and to extend employment opportunities to women in the region; she created the ‘Association des Planteurs de Pandanus du Sud Est’, which specialises in basketry. The association is composed of 12 members, 11 of whom are women. With substantial assistance from organisations including the GEF Small Grants Programme implemented by United Nations Development Programme, the Government, and the private sector, the association has managed to meet its production targets, diversify and scale-up its output. For Fabiola, doing business was all success until...the advent of COVID-19.

Despite the lockdown and restricted mobility, our business activities continued. Our shop was closed, but we kept operating as a home-based business. We had pre-orders to attend to,
even though delivery and pick up were restrained. Other challenges faced were: disrupted supply chains, withheld payment for pre-orders, reduced demand, and lack of finance to pay employees’ wages. Two weeks into the lockdown, I applied for the Work Access Permit for seven members, but I was the only one to obtain it. Since many products were waiting to be sold, I had to spend hours every day to protect them against mould formation.

Normally, we produce around 200 to 250 woven baskets in a 2-month period. During the confinement, the production was reduced to 50 baskets. We had no more access to Vacoas-leaves and to other key materials and had to use whatever we had in stock. Distractions at home can hamper work progress; and our chain-work model means we each depend on each other’s tasks. Nonetheless, we kept going. After the lockdown, there may be a rise in the price of raw materials. We fear this would directly impact our business.”

Despite uncertainties, Fabiola stays confident that her business will carry on, and she is proud that it contributes to the circular economy and environmental preservation.

“Despite uncertainties, Fabiola stays confident that her business will carry on, and she is proud that it contributes to the circular economy and environmental preservation.

The lockdown was challenging, but we used the time wisely to create new product models, to rethink our business relaunch, and strategize on client-outreach post lockdown. Online marketing is the way forward. We plan to discuss preparedness measures for the future. We must enhance our stocks, touch base with old clients, and secure contracts in advance from hotels, supermarkets and other retailers, including the government. We can produce lunch baskets for school children. The future of our association remains promising, as our business model is eco-friendly and the material used is sustainable, a direct alternative to plastic.”

Fabiola invites future entrepreneurs to contribute to sustainable production.
For Annabelle, working from home had been already a regular practice before the outbreak of COVID-19. Despite having embraced the concept, the Director of the 361 Leadership, Management Academy (CIEL Textile) knew that the lockdown would have a disruptive effect on her professional life. It was not long before she had to face the challenge of working from home, home-schooling her children, and pursuing her household chores altogether. She describes this situation as a “shock”.

“I had no choice but to adapt to the situation and try to deliver on all fronts. Every day I took advantage of my children’s sleep to move on with my work. Given that my partner was not working during the lockdown, he helped with the cooking and took care of our children. However, I still felt compelled to help and I decided to homeschool the children every morning. This brought me to schedule most of my meetings in the afternoon. At times, it was hard to draw the line between ‘being at work’ and ‘being at home’. Occasionally, my kids would interrupt my meetings.”

Speaking up about social pressures and gender roles, Annabelle maintains that many women tend to prioritise domestic duties over paid-work. She hopes that a better balance could be found so that women can be on a par with men as economic participants, especially at a time when working from home is becoming more than just a trend.

**Institutionalising more policies to assist women to balance their paid and unpaid duties would be a welcome relief**, according to Annabelle. She states: “The first three weeks into the lockdown were the hardest. The situation was unprecedented and unfortunately, we had not thought about stocking up food in advance. Finding food for the week was quite stressful. That triggered tensions at home, but we managed to handle it. To keep good mental health, the practice of meditation helped. It was also important for me to leave the computer screen every now and then and to have afternoon strolls in the garden with my family.

In spite of unwavering challenges, work from home has been amazingly productive. With my team, we organised concise, focused, and highly effective meetings. Furthermore, not having to be stuck in traffic allowed me to gain two hours per day. Once the lockdown is over, we are expected to resume conventional office work, but there will be no one to take care of my children who will resume school later. I should probably negotiate arrangements with my employer, but the fact that job security has become brittle does not help.

The social expectations and mental load exclusively borne by women, mothers, working mothers are real. At CIEL, we are working on setting up a Women Forum to discuss salient gender issues, as it is conspicuous that women self-limit and compromise on their career due to gendered stereotypes and roles. For instance, at my level we are only two women out of 25 directors. It is time we adhere to diversity and inclusivity at all levels of society, and reflect on the needs of all groups of people, especially across decision-making boards. If I have any advice for young women: put your career and aspirations first!”

As the work-from-home strategy continues to be endorsed post-lockdown, Annabelle calls for an open dialogue, at policy level, on the implications of gender norms and double burden care work on women’s productivity.
Sanaa’s adaptation to the work-home model

“I was on a business trip to South Africa and the COVID-19 crisis was rapidly worsening there. Some days after I came back to Mauritius, the curfew was implemented. The unknown was fearful. Concerning work, we carried on with business as usual, except that it was all about working from home.”

Sanaa, R&D Fabric Designer at CDL Knits, has a conventional work pattern of 08hrs00 to 17hrs00. Once Sanaa started working from home, her gendered role as a mother became more prominent—she had to juggle with work, chores, and childcare. This culminated in increased stress levels and physical exhaustion.

“Adapting to this new mode of working was crucial. Finding my bearings in this fog of merged time, space and tasks was vital. With my husband working long hours, I was forced to multitask and to make a plan. Starting work around 06hrs00, until my two-year-old girl daughter wakes up, was a daily routine. Throughout the day, I swayed back and forth between work and mother care duties. After rocking my baby to sleep at 11hrs00, I would resume the work marathon as I must account for my working hours. I was depleted of energy. After a month, things changed. My husband and I initiated a shared daily schedule to allocate work-childcare time.”

Annabelle’s work-life balance

“Speaking up about social pressures and gender roles, Annabelle maintains that many women tend to prioritise domestic duties over paid-work. She hopes that a better balance could be found so that women can be on a par with men as economic participants, especially at a time when working from home is becoming more than just a trend. Institutionalising more policies to assist women to balance their paid and unpaid duties would be a welcome relief, according to Annabelle. She states:

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Living and adapting to unprecedented lockdown conditions have implied opening a dialogue about addressing the mental health of working mothers.

For mothers who are working from home, the mental burden has encompassed living in confinement, adjusting to tight working schedules and attending to care duties, as depicted by Sanaa’s experience.

“Mental concentration was the toughest part. Your mind is split between work and keeping an eye on the baby. When I had meetings, my husband would secure free time slots from work to take care of her. Productivity has not been 100% but, considering everything, it was still very fruitful. I wish the Government would have allowed parents to drop kids at a Carer, like family members, during the lockdown. In the long run, companies must rethink work-life balance for employees. Working from home is not that bad in itself and flexitime can help people accommodate other priorities, like familial commitments.”

Sanaa hopes that the ‘new normal’ work-from-home concept be formally integrated into the Employment Rights Act. She also hopes that the Government will extend subsidies to support employees, especially women with vulnerable financial backgrounds, to access capabilities and resources to adapt to homebound work.

She ends up by stating that:

“The work-home model is sustainable in every way. It avoids wasting time in heavy traffic, and contributes to the reduction of carbon emissions.”

Coupled with my permanent position at the Head Office of CIEL Group, I am a board member on a number of companies of the CIEL group, and also serve on boards in other institutions including the Bank of Mauritius, the Financial Reporting Council and the Mauritius Institute of Directors. I worked throughout the time spent in SA, and still do. For two weeks, my surgery and subsequent recovery necessitated a pause, but immediately after I resumed my functions.

For Christine, Group General Counsel at CIEL, outliving the lockdown away from her homeland, Mauritius, entailed several challenges. Just prior to the curfew and closure of country borders, she flew to South Africa (SA) for medical reasons. There, she demonstrated remarkable strength in coping with both a chemotherapy for breast cancer treatment and the need to recover from a recent surgery. Despite her medical condition, she showed additional resilience to endure the confinement far from her partner and family, and to fulfilling her professional duties.

Christine’s efforts to enhance her mental and physical health

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With the National Budget 2020/2021 and the Covid-19 Bill that entailed new employment laws, I had to deal with all the legal implications at the level of CIEL group. My highly demanding work somehow helped me to switch focus during the long days of the lockdown.

I had recourse to meditation, Tai Chi and Qi Gong for my overall wellbeing. To be at peace was fundamental and that required mental strength and acceptance. As soon as the lockdown measures were eased in South Africa, I went out and enjoyed long soothing walks.

According to Christine “the work-from-home concept is promising but needs to be further developed. Leveraging on innovation and requisite tools to support employees in their home premises, will help them adapt with heightened capabilities for increased productivity...”

With the endorsement of the work from home strategy by the COVID-19 Bill on 9 May 2020, many female employees continue to work exclusively from home post-lockdown, while others commute to attend work at their respective offices on a rotational basis. Due to gender and intersectional disparities, vulnerable categories of employees may have hindered access to the tools and technologies required to level up to work expectations. A gender and intersectional assessment of the ‘new normal’ concept remains to be effectuated to bridge the gaps to equip and empower working women across the social stratification.

**Conclusion**

To better support female workers, it is crucial to identify their immediate and longer-term needs. This provides an avenue for a more targeted approach to formulating preparedness response strategies.

The lived experiences of the women featured in Gendered Voices Issue 2, demonstrate the specific challenges faced by women during the COVID lockdown period. Pre-existing gender stereotypes, ingrained sociocultural and socioeconomic systems, all contributed to a challenge to women’s productivity. These gendered roles and the mental stress that came along with it, particularly in a lockdown context, put paid to the need for clear support mechanisms and policy measures to foster better work life balance.

Notwithstanding the multifaceted challenges, many women have developed adaptive measures, exercised agency, and shown resilience to perform paid and unpaid work. Amidst a work environment that is rapidly changing with the ‘new normal’, resolving the gendered challenges exclusively faced by working women at home, is crucial. To allow women to participate to their full capacity in the economy, strategic gender needs must be addressed at policy and institutional levels to sustain women’s economic participation for long term benefits.

Teleworking has offered new opportunities for both workers and employers through the COVID-19 crisis. However, women workers must be able to negotiate arrangements to carry on with other important responsibilities such as taking care of children, the sick and the elderly, and their own physical and mental health.

With Mauritius now being classified as a High-Income country by the World Bank, policies in place should ensure that any potential income gap is addressed. From 2001 to 2015, the World Bank Group estimated that the gap between the poorest and the richest segment of the Mauritian population increased by 37%; and in 2019, and further highlighted that socioeconomic inequality was on the rise at the national level, with a disproportionate effect on women.

As the impacts of COVID-19 has the potential to further exacerbate those existing gender inequalities, especially in terms of income, the World Bank, 2019 states that:

> Women’s participation (in the labour force) has the potential to increase further and contribute to narrowing inequality in household labor income and achieving the full potential of the economy to the extent that the income will be more evenly shared across households.”
References

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**INTRODUCTION**

Gendered Voices Issue 3 explores the multifaceted challenges faced by different cohorts of elderly women during the lockdown. An insight into their unique lived-experiences sheds light on key components of their vulnerabilities and resilience, as well as their coping strategies. The restricted measures brought by COVID-19 and its impact on the elderly population paves the way to a reflection on the socio-economic status of elderly women and their quality of life. A category of the “young-old” is hopeful to continue to engage in decent employment, while the middle-old have different interests. The higher number of women transitioning into these two categories presents an opportunity to promote age-sensitive programming at national level.
Gender equality is integral to Australia’s foreign policy reflecting our national values. Australia pursues this agenda with other countries, in international fora like the Human Rights Council and through our development work. Societies that include women in all aspects of economic, political and cultural life are more likely to be vibrant, inclusive, productive and stable. Financial security and independence for women underpin strong and sustainable economies, increasing the well-being of families and communities. The contribution of women will be particularly important for post-COVID-19 recovery.

A gender sensitive approach recognises that challenges, including in a pandemic, may affect men and women differently. Increasingly in Australia, older women are becoming the face of homelessness as the gender pay gap persists. Structural inequality requires efforts at all levels to address imbalances and increase the visibility of female role models.

In Australia, the Male Champions of Change Program leverages the participation of influential leaders to ensure that happens in practical ways.

Australia and Mauritius have shared priorities including women’s economic empowerment under the aegis of the Indian Ocean Rim Association. I recently had the privilege to sign a partnership with UNDP to support projects with Mauritian Government stakeholders including the Rodrigues Regional Assembly aimed at tackling gender-based violence and gender stereotypes. This builds on work by the South Australian Department of Corrections on rehabilitation for perpetrators of violence and the Australian Workplace Gender Equality Agency, along with efforts to support STEM studies for women and girls.

We continue to support the Association Mauricienne des Femmes Chefs d’Entreprises on its mentoring program as it progresses to the next phase in partnership with Australian female entrepreneurs to develop a digital platform for capacity building of women entrepreneurs in the region. Digital platforms and regional partnerships have become more important than ever in the COVID-19 era. Together we can build back better.

Jenny Dee
Australian High Commissioner to Mauritius and Seychelles; Ambassador to Madagascar and Comoros, June 2017 - August 2020

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The feminisation of ageing is a global phenomenon. In Mauritius, the life expectancy for women is 77.8 years compared to 71.4 years for men. With an elderly population composed of 9.3% of women and 7.5% of men, within the 60 years and above age category, Mauritius is following this trend.

From the outset of COVID-19, rapidly accumulating global data have pinpointed to the elderly population as being particularly vulnerable to the virus. Beyond age, baseline medical co-morbidities present in patients are mitigating their chances of recovery from COVID-19.

A UNDP Mauritius Policy Briefing Note has established that COVID-19 is not gender-neutral in its implications. Likewise, gender and intersectional studies show that elderly women are generally more susceptible to poverty, social exclusion, lacking capabilities and underrepresentation in data coverage, such as domestic violence. In addition to the personal suffering caused by COVID-19, the pandemic is likely to exacerbate the vulnerabilities of elderly people due to heightened risk of forced retirement, unemployment, isolation, and discrimination.

In Mauritius, to contain the pandemic and curtail risks, responsive and preventive measures were immediately implemented by the local authorities, in parallel to the sanitary curfew that came into force on 20 March 2020. This included targeted campaigns such as home-delivery of pension allowances, implementation of senior shopping hours and influenza vaccines for those aged 60 and above. In solidarity, civil society mobilised capabilities and resources to reach out to elderly people in need.

Local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have been raising the alarm on the growing issue of elder abuse and ageism. Several social protection schemes and specific legal frameworks cover the elderly segment of the population, amongst which are: the Protection of Elderly Persons Act 2005, the National Pensions Act 1976 and Senior Citizens Council Act 1985. In 2015, the Global Age Watch Index ranked Mauritius 42nd out of 96 countries, and first in Africa.

The National Budget 2020/21 also introduced a new pension system proposal, leveraging contributory, participative and collective schemes, while keeping the pension threshold at USD 225 per month. The introduction of a “Service Employment Cheque”, an addition to the Universal Basic Retirement Pension, is extended to Mauritians engaged in the informal sector as Carers, Household Employees, Helpers - sectors which are predominantly feminised informal occupations.
WOMEN, AGE AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
NAVIGATING THE HARDSHIPS OF LOCKDOWN FOR MARYSE

With her two children residing overseas, 77 year old Maryse leads a solitary life. When her husband passed away four years ago, she found consolation in her daily activities and rare outings organized by the government for senior citizens. Suffering from diabetes for over a decade, Maryse keeps healthy by taking daily morning walks in the vicinity of her home and attending to her gardening activities throughout the day.

With the advent of COVID-19 and the subsequent social distancing and lockdown measures imposed, Maryse felt an acute sense of loneliness and insecurity.

“As a person suffering from various health problems, including diabetes, I dreaded the idea that my carer would stop visiting me. I sometimes forget to take my medicines, and my carer always makes sure that I would take all of them within the required timeframe of the day. She would check my blood sugar and advise me on what I can consume or not. With the sudden measures implemented due to COVID-19, my carer had to stop her visits. Even though she phoned me every day to make sure I was fine, I strongly missed her presence. I felt like amputated of the physical connection I had with her.

Twice a day, my children would call me on WhatsApp©. Communicating through new technologies was not so obvious since I am not tech-savvy. My sight not being particularly good either, having to deal with small characters on the screen of the mobile phone was testing. Thus, I resorted to mainly using the phone, but that triggered periodic migraines, especially at night. My children were concerned about how I was coping with the situation, and the truth is that I was not mentally prepared to face total isolation. I found myself staring into the void for hours, recollecting memories of the time spent with my husband. I did not have anyone with whom to share my sorrows. From time to time, I would call some old friends who were, likewise, battling loneliness and health complications. Even if we required a medical check-up, none of us would want to go to the hospital. We were too afraid of catching the virus.”

One day, Maryse felt physically drained. As she headed for a shower that afternoon, she fell. Upon opening her eyes again, the room was dark.

“I knew I had fallen unconscious. It was daunting and I was in dire pain. As I crawled my way to the bedroom, I managed to call my carer. She immediately called the ambulance and came to open the door with her spare key. Once the intervention team arrived, they put me on a stretcher and then took me to the nearest hospital. Fortunately, I had nothing broken. However, I was advised to stay at the hospital for some time. I don’t know how long it took. Days seemed to stretch into weeks. Actually, it was difficult to keep track of time amidst the lockdown.

Notwithstanding my physical pain, I was relieved to speak to the kind doctors and nurses at the hospital. I have realised how much the lack of human contact had...
impacted me and how much being surrounded by people allowed me to cope mentally. When I returned home, the lockdown was nearly over. My carer started coming again, despite strict sanitary measures. She helps by apply soothing cream on my arms and legs which are still painful. As a diabetic, I have to take extra precautions pertaining to injuries. I was lucky that nothing worse happened.

On a positive note, my neighbour was very kind and occasionally bought groceries for me during the lockdown. Fortunately, I did not come short of food and did not have to contact the authorities for food packages. Anyway, my appetite was not very good throughout the confinement. Now I can eat again and I hope to continue my daily walks, which are indispensable for maintaining my health as a diabetic."

Maryse advises all young women to prioritise education. She states that education has been the key to her personal growth and to her understanding of life and its complexities. She calls upon the Government to continue investing in the empowerment of the elderly population in the light of their different priorities.
Catherine, 60 years old, was on vacation in Sri Lanka with her husband when the Mauritian borders were closed. Panic-stricken at the announcement of border closure in Mauritius, the couple looked for other destination options and resolved to travel to Singapore. Catherine explained that it was a scary moment - being aware of the risk of contracting the virus and being stranded in a foreign land.

In Sri Lanka, we were lodged somewhere in the mountains, figuring out what to do. Visiting our son in Australia was an option, but we did not have the required visas. Singapore was the only choice left. By the time we booked our flight and flew to the Maldives in transit, then to Dubai for another transit to catch the final plane for Singapore, we had to cope with bottlenecks and delays. As were told that we had no chance to board the next flight, we beseeched the authorities and they finally allowed us to embark the due plane. We had to race frantically across the airport with heavy luggage. We could not afford to miss that last plane in Dubai as waiting for the next one would have meant reaching Singapore after the enactment of quarantine policy for all travelers. To us, quarantine resonated with fear.”

Days later, repatriation missions were operated by Air Mauritius and the couple grabbed the opportunity to get back to the country. Once arrived, they were swiftly transferred to a hotel as part of the quarantine protocol. As Catherine and her husband were amongst the first batches of repatriates, her family was able to dispatch certain resources to support them in coping with the situation. For instance, Catherine’s children sent a kettle via taxi, and this was useful as many items have been removed from the hotel bedroom. However with lockdown measures, walks on the beach were not permitted, and Catherine had to find other solutions to keep fit.

As an active person, exercising amid quarantine was imperative. Many other women locked themselves up in their rooms. Their partners would fetch their meals from downstairs. From my standpoint, the self-imposed isolation was unwise and unhealthy, both mentally and physically. Furthermore, I heard complaints originating...
from our group on live radio programs. Some were contesting the treatment, food quality and other unpleasant matters relating to our quarantine experience. However, these talk shows did not resonate with me because the staff were very caring with most of us.

Considering the scale of the crisis and all the support procured at the expense of the State, the services were commendable!

Two weeks into the quarantine, all of us had to undergo a COVID-19 test. It was the watershed moment in our experience. Two persons were found COVID-positive. We were petrified. Questions swamped our heads. Would the quarantine period be extended? Would a second test be done? What if I had contracted the virus? At one point, we were informed that the quarantine period would be prolonged over two more weeks and that couples would be segregated. I could already sense the adverse implications of such policies. Fortunately, not even two days later, we were told that we were able to go home.

Now at home, our family business is keeping me busy. I have resumed gym and Tae Bo classes. I realise how my adherence to physical fitness has finally paid off, especially at a precarious time of a pandemic that required physical aptitude and resilience.

With the experience gained over the years, Catherine is now very conscious of the importance of keeping fit. She encourages younger women to build their physical stamina, especially as they are called to perform numerous duties and cope with various challenges during their lives.
AN UNPRECEDENTED EXPERIENCE AND LEARNING CURVE FOR ANITA
After a long career as a nurse in the United Kingdom, Anita retired over two decades ago. Aged 71 years old, she has settled in Mauritius with her spouse, hoping to reinvent herself. Owning a beach-front villa, Anita has been renting out a segment of her home and a studio, mostly to foreigners. Prior to the lockdown, confirmed bookings of potential travelers to the island earned a significant revenue for the retiree. However, with the advent of COVID-19 and the subsequent closure of frontiers and confinement measures, her business activities and plans are now seriously disturbed.

As an organised person, managing my time to fulfill my daily tasks is a day-to-day achievement. The housekeeper helps me around the house and prepares the rooms and studio for clients. Paying the bills, handling the business, negotiating and looking after clients, fall under my responsibilities; while my husband deals with the technical stuff and maintains our website. My church commitments consume much of my time too. COVID-19 has somewhat dismantled my whole livelihood, halted my social engagements, prompted the cancellation of client’s bookings, and subsequently impacted my income. It was all unprecedented and confusing!

Before the lockdown period, Anita’s husband underwent surgery and was advised to refrain from efforts for at least two months. Anita was compelled to take care of the shopping and the household but, wearing a pace-maker, she was not able to buy and carry ample amounts of food.

Unfortunately, we had not stocked up sufficiently prior to the lockdown and came short of rations in the first week of confinement. I do commend the efforts of the government in reaching out to the poor and elderly people with food packs, medicaments and other supplies, but, as an affluent elderly person, I felt alienated from accessing these benefits. I tried online shopping once, but my order delivery was heavily delayed. My gardener brought us bread a couple of times, but there were days we had none. Upon the reopening of supermarkets, queuing became a real challenge. At times, waiting in the queue could take over an hour and it was straining! Moreover, prices had climbed, and I had to spend more to get basic commodities. Buying the best and freshest products available was a priority for health reasons.

Anita explains that prayers really helped her in managing the various challenges of the lockdown period. Additionally, she is thankful for being able to use technology to keep feeling part of a support network.

To cope mentally, delving into bible scriptures and prayer were comforting. Improving my IT literacy, I attended online prayer meetings and maintained virtual social connections, which helped to minimise the feeling of isolation and loneliness.”
Nalini is 61 years old and had a 42-year career in aviation. She considers herself still physically and mentally fit for work. However, the collateral impacts of COVID-19 on tourism in Mauritius has resulted in the whole fleet of the National Airline being grounded for months, with no guarantee that the national carrier will be able to resume its usual activities.

Unfortunately, the prolonged closure of the borders of the country has implied early termination of contracts for many crew members, and Nalini has not been spared. Forced into early retirement, she recalls her experience as part of the cabin crew, especially being a woman, juggling with her caring role as a mother and tackling family obligations.

“\nIn my youth, the glamour and jets around the world intrinsic to the job of Cabin Crew enticed me. I was amongst the first batches of recruits upon the arrival of the Boeing 707 in Mauritius. It was a dream come true, but one saddled with a colossal price. The pathway to becoming Senior Flight Purser has involved years of sacrifice, long absences from home, spending Christmas far from my family and wishing my children ‘Happy birthday’ across oceans, and especially not being by the side of my mother when she died. Prior to COVID-19, my life summed up to ceaseless flights with intervals of one to two days at home. In my spare time, I would cook and throw dinner parties for friends.

In the midst of the lockdown, I felt secluded. I found myself juggling with the overload of chores. It was totally overwhelming! For years, my work had required constant human interactions and touching down on different continents. The confinement felt like real sequestration.

To cope with the unprecedented situation, I sought to do some social work. I got in touch with an NGO and offered to cook for homeless people. Seeing photos of these disadvantaged persons feasting on my food donation was deeply gratifying. A colleague animated Tai Chi session via Zoom, which were tremendously helpful for my mental and physical wellbeing.”
Weeks into the lockdown, a group of staff, including Nalini, received a call for a meeting at the office of the national airline. The next day, they were all offered early retirement and asked to accede a lump sum or make application to the Redundancy Board.

For Nalini, losing her job, felt like losing her identity.

“We felt trapped even though a week for consideration was granted. We all left feeling defeated. It was a ripping moment for us all who had nurtured a family-like crew life and culture. I cried for days and still do. I requested for a last flight, while still digesting the idea that this would be the very last time...I needed to bid farewell to my profession.

Feeling both a deep level of sadness and joy, Nalini embarked on a repatriation flight to London, then to Paris, to gather cargo, before going into self quarantine once back at her home in Mauritius. While she foresees financial difficulties with the loss of her job, Nalini is hopeful for the future and will build on her professional skills gained to further her career as a woman entrepreneur.

“As we speak, it is unclear whether I will even access the promised lump sum, which was contingent to my agreement to early retirement. The situation is riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions, almost on a daily basis, that it is foreseen that I may be facing financial difficulties in the future. Some business ideas are sprouting in my head, like perhaps a prospective culinary venture. Thankfully, my job has given me life-skills and empowered me to face precarities of all kind.

I would advise young women to work hard, give their best, and never back down. Believe and stand up for truth, fairness and righteousness!”

CONCLUSION

The voices of women featured in this Issue brings the multi-faceted gendered impact of COVID-19 to the forefront. More specifically, it sheds light on the ways in which the pandemic has disproportionately affected the livelihoods of ageing women. This category of youthful ageing women still aspire to be economically active and working helps them to stay healthy longer.

All categories of the elderly cohort aim to staying socially engaged and have embraced the use of information technology and social media as part of their new communication medium.

Additionally, women have highlighted the importance of keeping physically and mentally active. As Catherine recalls, the fear of exposure to the virus was mentally internalised, despite the high standard of care in quarantine facilities. Another challenge faced was the accessibility of resources given the lack of mobility and the continuity of their gendered role by taking care of household duties.

As many companies struggle to revamp business and profit in the Post-COVID-19 phase, elderly people nearing the age of retirement are likely the first to face job redundancy, as shown in Nalini’s narrative. Without responsive safety nets in the form of two-pronged inclusive policies and financial support, it is estimated that the elderly groups will be pushed into poverty or severe financial difficulties, which may further affect their livelihoods and impact negatively on their mental health.

To allow different segments of elderly women to lead a dignified and healthy life post-COVID-19, targeted policies and empowerment programmes may be developed and implemented to ensure a holistic approach to achieving SDG5.
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INTRODUCTION

Gendered Voices explores the multifaceted challenges faced by young women since the outbreak of COVID-19 and the consequential lockdown. An insight into the unique lived-experiences of some young women reveals aspects of their struggles and ways in which they are building on resilience.

The series of interviews focus on the mental and physical coping mechanisms developed by the informants, along with forms of outreach support strategies they benefitted from or not, and their specific needs to be better assisted in the wake of the 'new normal'.
Message from Roberta Clarke, Officer in Charge
UN Women East and Southern Africa

As the global COVID pandemic numbers continue to grow, for small island developing states like Mauritius, heavily reliant on the travel and tourism industry, the economic downturn for the country, its communities and households, is a harsh reality. Young people, seeking to commence their working lives and move into greater independence, are experiencing this uncertainty in specific ways. As this newsletter shows, youth unemployment has grown from 6.7% in 2019 to 17% in 2020. Within this age group, young women are also more likely to be unemployed, regardless of educational achievements.

This is just one way in which the impacts of COVID are different for women. Because women already carry a disproportionate responsibility for the care of children, the sick and the elderly, the disruption of the economy and pressure on state expenditure to meet social protection and security needs, has far-reaching and negative consequences.

As is now well acknowledged, crises tend to exacerbate the experience of inequalities. For women globally, the crisis has deepened vulnerabilities to a range of harms: economic dislocation, poverty, insecurities (including food) and sexual and gender-based violence. Both women and men, and especially those who are living below the poverty line, will face hardship due to economic impacts of the global lockdowns. However, women who have disproportionate care responsibilities and higher levels of unemployment are more vulnerable to exploitative conditions of work.

Yet, in all age groups, women demonstrate resilience and resolve to contribute meaningfully. They do so as leaders of non-governmental organisations providing services for domestic violence victims; many are entrepreneurs employing others; and they are the caretakers at home, the community and the health sector. Much of their work is under-valued and not well enough recognized.

This newsletter is important for centering the experiences of women and in particular the younger generation of women. Through our greater understanding, we can all be better advocates for addressing the social, political and economic impacts of COVID on the diversity of women and girls.

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COVID-19: YOUNGER GENERATION WOMEN FACING THE 'NEW NORMAL'

COVID-19 has disrupted the livelihoods of people from all walks of life, including a younger generation of women in Mauritius. They are today at a crossroad. Young women are faced with (i) an already volatile job market prior to the onset of the pandemic; and (ii) the possibility of job layoffs, temporary leaves, reduced working hours and pay cuts.

In Mauritius, official statistics show a stark hike in the unemployment rate from 6.7% in 2019 to 17% in 2020. Concurrently, youth unemployment stood at 23% in 2019. The contrast between male and female unemployment is prominently highest below 25 years old, whereby young women are more likely to be jobless than their male counterparts, irrespective of having completed a higher level of education.

For the Gendered Voices Newsletter, women aged 18 to 35 years were interviewed to enable a better understanding of the difficulties faced by young women during the COVID-19 lockdown. The findings are that approximately 60% experienced acute anxiety, 40% fear and 51.4% stress.

In light of the 'new normal' and a subsequent shift from the conventional office space to a homebound work environment, most of them have underscored the difficult load of double burden care-work and barriers to sustaining a healthy work-life balance.

71.4% of women claim to have experienced psychological violence, 43% economic violence, and 14.3% physical and verbal violence.

A reflection about future plans led most respondents to highlight work instability as their most imminent concern. Overall, there was a general consensus amongst the respondents that finding a job amid the current economic climate would be difficult.
YOUNG WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF COVID-19
Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 and the lockdown measures imposed, 24-year-old Amelie was leading an active life like many other young people. Her studies and internships in the tourism and hospitality realm completed, she landed a sizeable job offer from one of the world’s leading consulting companies. Involved in overlapping trainings, shifting from projects to projects to build upon her knowledge and work experience, Amelie says she was rapidly standing out and had promising opportunities lining up. The momentum came to an abrupt halt in the advent of the pandemic. Now, she fears the unlikelihood of her probation contract with the consulting company transcending into a long-term one.

"Before the lockdown, I was practically never at home. During the week, I was gone for work and, in the weekend, there was always a string of activities to tap into with my friends. We had various plans in the pipeline for this year, like mountain hiking, road trips weaving along the mesmerising coastal roads of Mauritius and other sightseeing places with a wealth of arts and culture to bask into. It was all exciting and gave us something to look forward to after the long working hours of the week. But the lockdown came unexpectedly.

I seized every opportunity to cross-train so I could have exposure to and experience in various departments, which would strategically make me an indispensable workforce in the company. I was reaping the fruits of my hard work as I was positioned in units which were out of reach to other colleagues on a similar contract.

However, COVID-19 has caused tremendous upheaval in my workplan. I found myself trapped overnight at home in my bedroom, having to deliver twice as much in terms of workload. I felt that I simply became a slave to my mouse.

On a normal 8-hour-day spent at the office, I would occasionally take leave from my desk to discuss with colleagues on project-related issues always in the scope of work."
I can finally soak up the sun again and stretch my muscles, breathe and work on my mental health.

As a plan B, lest my probation contract is ended without further prospects, I have applied to pursue another university degree. As a young person, I am perhaps still lucky that I can expand my horizons post COVID-19, but I feel for those who may find it harder to change their career after decades in the same field. In any case, I try to remain positive. This is vital for me.

However, during the lockdown, I had to read documents, whilst simultaneously keeping the mouse active, otherwise it would be deemed unproductive time.

The impact of the 'new normal' led to such severe mental stress, lack of physical activities, skipping meals and staring at my laptop screen for hours, that I ended up suffering from acute headaches at night, digestive issues from irregular meals intake and an unprecedented level of exhaustion. And I could not escape this trap! I could not take little breaks. Complaining was inconceivable given the fact that I am still on probation. In the midst of job losses and an erratic job market, I simply cannot afford to lose this job opportunity.

Now that the lockdown is over, I am gradually resuming my old habits. I go out and meet a couple of friends.
ABIGAIL'S QUEST TO REACH HOME SAFELY

33-year-old Abigail is a Front Desk Manager for an international cruise company. Starting off as a receptionist, she rapidly climbed her way up to take on higher responsibilities, including training new staffs in the same unit. In this vein, Abigail has travelled across the world and discovered diverse cultures. Hopping from cruise ship to cruise ship all year round, she highlights the fact that the marine world used to be male dominated, but is fast opening up to women who, just as men, are capable of being at sea for long periods of time. Just prior to COVID-19, the seafarer landed in a French harbour, ready to embark a new ship when, to her dismay, the trip was promptly cancelled due to border closure and sanitary measures. Since then, the perpetual quest to go back to Mauritius has been on.

“We already knew of the virus outbreak since December 2019, before it became widely exposed in the media. However, it was not yet declared a pandemic and subsequently business ran as usual, even for us. Before the strict measures came into place, I was travelling extensively.

I covered New Zealand, Australia, the Caribbean islands and various European destinations within months, before ending up in France. My job entails training staff on migration-related procedures; hence ships can be moored in harbours without infringing migration laws, likewise for passengers upon disembarkation. This saves the company colossal fines. On this new cruise ship, we were finalising everything before setting off for its launch in Southampton. But that never happened. At least, not yet.”

From the moment the lockdown came into place in France, all staff members were compelled to stay onboard. Each was allocated a room and was only allowed to move about within the parameters of the ship.

“I carried on my work duties during the lockdown, as per my responsibilities as an essential worker. I had to handle all kinds of situations.”
Several crew members onboard experienced severe anxiety and were panic-stricken. On my side, I kept contacting the Mauritian Embassy in France to help us - Mauritian onboard - to get home as quickly as possible, but to no avail.

My company tried every possible way to help us, Mauritians. They even put a plane at our disposal to fly back at their own expense, but we were informed that the charter plane was not going to be allowed to land in Mauritius. We felt left out! As if Mauritian Seafarers did not count...

I am aware of the negative perception of cruise ships in light of Coronavirus, but our cruise ships have all the sanitary protocols in place as we deal with thousands of passengers embarking from multiple ports across the globe.

For us, sanitary measures are imperative and already embedded in our work culture. However, the COVID-19 is in a league of its own. This is a learning curve not only for us seafarers, but for the whole world!

As the lockdown came close to an end, Abigail and the rest of the crew were allowed to move about more freely, but with respect to sanitary protocols. She tried to forget about the negative feelings about being unable to reach home safely.

"I used the deck to practice some sports and keep fit. We often played Bingo virtually on board; watched the latest movies for free; and I would go through books and books via Kindle. Without all these activities, it would have been hard for me to deal with the situation and keep helping others."
SHAFINAZ’S EXPERIENCE AS A FRONTLINER

Since 2006, 35-year-old Shafinaz has been working as a Nursing Officer in a hospital of Mauritius. Over the years, she has accumulated experience in cross-cutting fields of her work and witnessed significant developments in the medical domain. The hospital in which she has been arduously working, has undergone an important renovation and has been equipped with modern equipment. Clearly passionate about her job, her experience took another turn in the advent of COVID-19.

"Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, I was working in the gynecology ward. There were patients coming in everyday with different health complications. Some would stay overnight, some would solely have a checkup, and a handful would be admitted for surgery. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the work dynamic has changed radically. We stopped admitting people, except for emergencies, and we postponed surgeries except for life-threatening situations. We were all adhering to our functions, but we were gripped by fear. At some point, I was floated from my ward to the surgery one.

We took all the necessary precautions in line with strict sanitary protocols, which were already mandatory when dealing with surgeries. However, the fear of contamination was vividly ingrained within us.

A very important moment of my career was about to happen, when the nursing administration office shifted me to the Souillac Hospital for a short period of time, to attend to COVID patients. The decision was tough. After consulting my whole family, who gave me all the support and encouragement required, I was ready to go."
At Souillac, we were all geared up with masks, gloves, gowns; the PPE as it is known. The section in which I was placed dealt with newly admitted patients who showed minor symptoms. But still! The close proximity with patients who were tested positive for COVID was daunting. It takes the pervasive fear in the hospital up a notch. I would clean and look after them, risking all to care for those in need. One of the patients I attended was transferred to a different section as his health was deteriorating rapidly. The death of this person still marks me today.

In retrospect, I feel we - nurses - have not been sufficiently recognised for the work that we did during the sanitary crisis. It was taken for granted that we would run across medical establishments, day and night, to give the best possible care to patients. However, it is a relief to see that there has been a change in mindset since the onset of COVID-19. Now, I feel that our work is much more appreciated and respected.

The experience was harsh. Occasionally, tears ran down my face when I thought about all that was happening. I ruminated on the physical and mental state I would be in when returning home.

As I could not physically see my family, I consoled myself by speaking with them on the phone every single day.

After 6 days at Souillac, I was driven to a hotel for quarantine and was tested two days later. Fear brewed inside of me, as I worried over the outcome. Fortunately, the test revealed that I had not contracted the virus. I breathed a sigh of relief but knew a second one was scheduled for the following week. That one came out negative too.

Finally, I was happy to head home. Now, looking back, I am proud of myself and my whole family is proud of me too. It has been beyond exhausting, both physically and mentally, but I held on.

“Whatever comes my way today, I have the conviction that I can deal with it! After all, I chose that career knowing the risks that it entails.”
According to experts, people with a history or pattern of eating disorders were prone to stress and relapses during the COVID-19 lockdown. With the level of anxiety rising, self-quarantining, disrupting livelihoods and out of control external factors impacting the person, it is expected that this ‘abnormal’ relationship with food will worsen. 27-year-old Kathleen opened up about her long-running battle against bulimia amid lockdown.

It started progressively. The control over food gave me a sense of existence. What I mean is, though I could not control the negative elements in my life, this at least endowed me with a feeling of purpose and achievement, especially as my weight dropped considerably. Obviously, everyone noticed the change.

Ironically, the same people who were calling me ‘fatty Kat’ suddenly changed the tone and enquired about my health. My reply was always that it was puberty, but my parents were not convinced. I started a treatment the same year that I developed the illness. Despite all the treatment, I entertained an on-and-off relationship with the addiction, which would resurface in stressful times such as the outbreak of COVID-19.

I live in Australia and will be completing my PhD next year. When I travelled to Mauritius to visit my parents in late February 2020, I was fine and in a sort of recovery phase from bulimia. However, a spurring wave of stress hit me as soon as borders closed, with the gutting feeling of entrapment triggering a kind of depression.
During the lockdown, I was trapped in Mauritius away from my partner in Australia, my work environment, my friends and freedom. This all prompted the urge to binge and purge, as a form of stress relief from the interweaving drawbacks, and the need to take control over an irrepressible situation.

Amid the confinement, it was more complex than usual to deal with the addiction. Accessing food was not easy and this caused much stress in itself; and when I did, I felt so ashamed of what I intended on doing with it, that is, consuming and purging immediately after. My parents suspected that I had relapsed. I had no access to a psychologist or psychiatrist, or any possible treatment. I could not even escape to places that make me feel at peace, like the mountains. Tension escalated at home as my parents doubted that I was ever recovering at all during the years in Australia.

Bulimia is a feminised illness rarely spoken about, but many women are ensnared in this addiction. In Australia, the topic is not as taboo as in Mauritius. There should definitely be more open discussions on the issue. I could not, in my youth, speak to anyone about it as I was ashamed, and people would not understand the dynamics behind the addiction. It is perhaps easier to say that you are addicted to drugs than to binging and purging.

I hope that the Ministry of Gender Equality breaks the silence on this taboo and comes up with a support mechanism.”

CONCLUSION

This fourth edition of the Gendered Voices Newsletter has shown emerging evidence that young women between 18 and 35 have suffered extensively from the adverse impacts of COVID-19 and the lockdown measures brought about.

As economies remain in precariousness, many fear the potential loss of jobs. Due to gendered norms and discriminations entrenched in the socioeconomic system of Mauritius, job opportunities post COVID-19 may not be as easily accessible to young women compared to their male counterparts. Some female respondents have shared the need to reinvent themselves and shuffle their career options around, for instance, from a tourism sector in jeopardy to more promising industries.

Other hindrances entailed anxiety, double burden care-work and disruptions to work-life balance. The series of interviews also revealed similar dynamics of stress and apprehension for the future. For example, one informant confessed that the ‘new normal’ working conditions brought her to the point of physical burn out.

Others have shared of their ongoing battle to come back to Mauritius; personal struggle with eating disorders; and the internalisation of fear of contamination while directly attending to COVID-19 patients without adequate psychological support. In light of the evidence provided, it is hoped that targeted policies and empowerment programmes would be developed and implemented to ensure support and long-term benefits for young people.