

Summary of LNFOD review of the national COVID-19 response and recovery plan and the impact of budget cut on women and girls with disabilities in Lesotho:

This brief is intended to highlight the findings and recommendations proposed by the LNFOD desktop study on the review of the National COVID-19 response and recovery plan and the impact of the budget cut on the programs which support women and girls with disabilities in Lesotho.

The Lesotho National Federation of Organisations of the Disabled (LNFOD) commissioned a study in September 2021 aimed at investigating the extent to which the Lesotho national COVID-19 response and recovery plan is inclusive of persons with disabilities in terms of their inclusion and participation in its design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of such a plan.

Secondly, the study was intended to find out whether there have been budget cuts on the social protection programmes targeting persons with disabilities, particularly on women and girls with disabilities due to COVID-19 budget cut necessitated by COVID-19 response.

On the first question which the research investigated, LNFOD found that government through the National COVID-19 secretariat) NACOSEC) and other ministries which were actively working with NACOSEC to design, implement and monitor COVID-19 measures did not consider full and effective participation of persons with disabilities during the development and implementation of the national COVID-19 response and recovery plan. NACOSEC is made up of different experts coming from different field of studies and institutions in order to ensure that all sectors of the Basotho nation are well represented, and their views are included in the COVID-19 strategies. However, the disability sector was not participating. This situation led to the exclusion and persons with disabilities have been reported to have been affected disproportionately in terms of access to employment, education, Healthcare, and social protection.

The second biggest finding is that NACOSEC and other stakeholders implemented defensive education by producing COVID-19 public health information and materials which spelt out how the public should protect themselves from contracting COVID-19 to the exclusion of persons with disabilities in Lesotho. Meaning that the COVID-19 public health information and communication was not reproduced in accessible formats including in Braille,

appropriate audio, sign language, and in easy-to-read formats for persons with intellectual disabilities,

This situation resulted in the one assault case of a Deaf person who did not know of the public restrictions and was still travelling during a time in which she ended up being bitten by the security forces.

The right to personal assistance to persons with disabilities was seriously threatened and compromised as it had been impossible for most of persons with disabilities to adhere to the social distancing rules.

The study further indicates that, learners with disabilities were disproportionately affected by the closure of schools in the beginning of the pandemic because they did not have accessible learning materials during the school closure whilst at home.

In terms of question 2 on the budget cut on the programmes aimed at empowering women and girls with disabilities, the research was investigating whether there has been any cut on the budget which support social protection for women with disabilities as a result of COVID-19.

The research reveals that, women and girls with disabilities suffer multiple discrimination on the basis of gender and disability. Poverty is one factor which characterise the lives of women and girls with disabilities and hinder them from participating and benefiting fully from the social, and empowerment programmes in society. Lesotho is no exception to this finding since this situation is exacerbated by the patriarchal nature of the Basotho nation.

Instead of the budget cut on social programmes just like it has happened in many SADC countries, Lesotho was found to be doing very well in supporting social protection programs for persons with disabilities as it has started preparing for the provision of disability grant during COVID-19. However, the study reveals that few respondents were worried that, they are to choose between disability grant and other grants as they are not allowed to receive them simultaneously.

The research reveals that, government does not have specific programmes intended to empower women and girls with disabilities. Hence, it is difficult to measure their inclusion in the general social empowerment programmes since data is not disaggregated by disability.

Recommendations

In terms of meaningful participation and close consultation with COVID-19 decision-making processes, the research recommends that it is crucial to ensure participation of persons with disabilities in the decision-making processes in Lesotho regarding the design and implementation of the COVID-19 response and recovery plan. Public participation in issues affecting their human rights is an essential part of democratic governance,

In terms of education, the research strongly encourages the collaboration between Ministry of Education and Training, development partners, and organisations of persons with disabilities to devise sustainable solutions to ensure that learners with disabilities access online platforms so that they can continue learning during pandemics including COVID-19.

Under question 2 of the research, it has been revealed that women and girls suffer multiple discrimination and gender-based violence increased against them during COVID-19. It is highly recommended that government and organisations of persons with disabilities should design and implement prevention and response to gender-based violence programs against women and girls with disabilities during and beyond COVID-19.

In addition, the research indicates that Lesotho does not have specific empowerment programmes for women and girls with disabilities. This may increase their social vulnerability both within home and outside. It is highly recommended that government in collaboration with organisations of persons with disabilities should provide resources for the design and implementation of empowerment programmes for women and girls with disabilities. In Fact, government should allocate budget for the design, and implementation of empowerment programs for women and girls with disabilities as a means of addressing social and economic vulnerabilities encountered by women and girls with disabilities on daily basis.