



**PRESS STATEMENT ON THE EFFECTS OF COVID 19
ON EMPLOYMENT & GENDER RELATIONS**

DELIVERED BY

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Dear Members of the Press,

I welcome you members of the press to this briefing. I will cover in this address issues to do with labor relations between employers and employees, observance of **The World Day for Safety and Health at Work** and International Labor day and Gender Based Violence (GBV).

As you all may be aware, today 28th April, is a day set aside as **The World Day for Safety and Health at Work**. I will therefore, say something about it in the course of this address.

The COVID-19 pandemic is having serious effects on the health and general welfare of people across the world. Besides being a health challenge of unrivalled proportions, COVID-19 is having knock-on effects of far reaching proportions on all national economies; big and small, without exception.

In view of the foregoing, I convened a Tripartite Meeting of Government, Workers (***represented by the National Organization of Trade Unions, NOTU and the Central Organization of Free Trade Unions, COFTU***), and Employers; (represented by the Federation of Uganda Employers, FUE). The meeting discussed and agreed on a number of issues regarding the effects of COVID-19 on Employment including job security and the possible mitigation measures.

The Tripartite Meeting observed, noted and agreed that:

- i)** The COVID 19 Pandemic is affecting both the employees and employers in more or less equal measure;

- ii)** The effects of COVID-19 on labor are both negative and positive to some extent. In other words, there are some sectors like manufacturing that are gaining from the situation much as some are losing. The ability to exploit opportunities within the bad situation counts a lot;
- iii)** The Hotel Industry, Tourism, Transport and the Flower Exporters are among the most affected Employers; while others such as Factories producing soap, sanitizers, toilet tissues and face-masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE), are reportedly experiencing growth in their businesses;
- iv)** The magnitude of the negative effects of COVID-19 varies across and within sectors. Different employers and employees have been affected to different magnitudes;
- v)** Cash-flow deficiencies occasioned by the current lockdown have made it difficult for most Employers to meet employee costs including payment of wages. As a result, some employers have made decisions or are contemplating instituting employee-cost-reduction measures including pay-cut, employee lay-off and termination; and
- vi)** Most of the workers who have been terminated or laid-off are having difficulty in meeting their basic and essential needs including, food and health-care. The most affected in this category includes mainly casual workers in both the formal and informal sector who were being paid on daily basis.

Considering the fact that the COVID 19 Pandemic is a temporary occurrence, the situation calls for patience and mutual understanding between and among Workers and

Employers. Accordingly, the Tripartite Meeting agreed on measures and guidance to the Workers/employees and Employers as follows:

- i)* Whereas, employment relations are regulated by law, mitigating the effects of COVID-19 on employment relationships is more than a legal matter given the circumstances. Therefore, employers and workers are encouraged to find win-win solutions through dialogue as far as is reasonably practicable;
- ii)* Where possible, Employees should be encouraged to work from home, not only as a means of reducing overcrowding at the workplace and thereby increasing the risks of infection with COVID19, but as a measure of cutting on overhead costs at the workplace;
- iii)* Employees should be encouraged to take pending annual leave as one of the cost-cutting measures as well as decongesting work-places;
- iv)* Employers and employees are encouraged to negotiate/re negotiate wages before considering lay-offs or terminations;
- v)* Employers are encouraged/ advised to the extent possible, not to terminate employees. This is because the employers will require these employees when normal operations resume;

In addition, termination of employees will occasion more costs to employers in form of payment of terminal benefits for instance, payment in lieu of notice, compensation for leave days not taken, and severance packages, among others;

- vi)** Termination of employees should therefore, be taken as the last resort, after all the available softer options have been exhausted;
- vii)** Employers who despite the associated costs and lengthy procedures opt for termination, should strictly adhere to the law (Sections 58, 65 and 81 of the Employment Act, 2006, as well as Regulation 44 (a) and (b) of the Employment Regulations, 2011);
- viii)** Employers should ensure that the process of termination or lay-off are done with a humane face. Workers should be counselled prior to termination or lay-off;
- ix)** Employers should try as much as possible to take care of the basic needs (e.g. food) for the workers they lay-off as this will not only help them to stay connected to their workers but it is a re-assurance to the workers about the good will and intention of the employers towards them in the difficult circumstances;
- x)** Sectors not affected adversely by the COVID-19 pandemic like manufacturing, food processing and others shouldn't use the excuse of the pandemic to arbitrarily cut staff wages or lay off staff.
- xi)** The Ministry of Gender has asked the COVID 19 National Taskforce led by the Rt. Hon Prime minister to devise means of targeting and prioritizing the most vulnerable categories of workers who have been laid off or terminated, to benefit from the food being distributed. The LCs shouldn't discriminate against these casual workers by not regarding them as non-vulnerable since they always know them as working and therefore earning.

xii) Employees who have running loans with financial institutions are encouraged to take advantage of the directive issued by Bank of Uganda to the financial institutions to reschedule loan repayments;

Commercial Banks, on the other hand, are advised not to impose penalties on borrowers who would wish to retire their loans before the end of the loan term;

xiii) The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, will take keen interest in, and will continue addressing on a case-by-case basis, complaints raised by part-time workers and other workers who by the time of the COVID 19 lockdown, had no contracts and were sent home without payment of what was due to them as at the time of the lockdown. This includes most especially workers in the private and public education institutions;

xiv) In line with Section 19 of the Employment Act, 2006, all Employers should provide returns and statistics on the number of workers whose employment relationships have been affected or are likely to be affected during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This information will particularly be useful for policy advice and planning;

xv) After the Lockdown is fully lifted, the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development working with its partners will undertake a Rapid Assessment on the effects of COVID-19 on labour, employment and productivity, and consequently develop a Labour Market Risk Management Plan in consultation with the social partners; and

xvi) The Tripartite Meeting also agreed to contact Parliament to expedite the process of considering the amendment of the NSSF Act as one of the instruments to address the social security needs of the contributors.

THE WORLD DAY FOR OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH

Ladies and Gentlemen, I will now turn to the **World Day for Occupational Safety and Health**. As I already stated earlier, today the 28th April 2020, is the World Day for Occupational Safety and Health.

This day is commemorated every year as a day for awareness-raising campaign intended to focus international attention on emerging trends in the field of occupational safety and health and on the magnitude of work-related injuries, diseases and fatalities worldwide.

However, due to restrictions put in place in the fight against the COVID 19 pandemic, Uganda will not hold the national celebration of this Day as has been done in the past years. None-the-less, I would like to take this opportunity to call upon all Employers to comply with the occupational safety and health regulations and guidelines for workplaces in order to prevent work-related accidents and diseases; which are not only expensive but have implications on Labour productivity. The department of Occupational Safety & Health (OSH) of the Ministry has maintained skeletal staff at office to follow up on such cases of non-compliance with occupational safety standards by work places.

In the case of COVID 19, occupational safety and health measures include provision of personal protective equipment, observing the social distancing and good hygiene and sanitation practices.

In the same vein, I would like to inform the public that this year's International Labour Day Celebration which is supposed to be held this coming Friday, 1st

May 2020 in Mbarara, will not take place. The day however will be observed as a public holiday in our homes. We shall not have the usual public gatherings and the associated ceremonies for the same reasons stated earlier. But owing to the great importance that we attach to this Day, we are expecting His Excellency the President to make a televised address to the nation on Friday 1st May 2020. Once confirmed, we shall inform you to prepare to receive the President's message accordingly.

GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

Whereas, home is supposed to be the safest place for one to stay, including avoiding COVID-19 infection, some people are turning their homes into unsafe places for human habitation. Ordinarily, I would expect the lockdown to help families come together and bond more, share challenges and address issues of concern in unison, but surprisingly, it is not the case in some families.

We are getting reports that due to the current social environment of lockdown, cases of violence against women and children are increasing. I note with great concern the increasing cases of Gender Based Violence in families (GBV) throughout the Country. Some of these cases have already claimed lives of Ugandans; even before COVID 19 does so. Within a period of less than one month, between 30th March and 28th April 2020, a total of 3,280 cases of GBV were reported to the Police. This is in addition to 283 cases of Violence Against Children which were reported through our National Child Helpline –Sauti 116, in Kireka.

These acts of violence degrade the dignity of humanity and are therefore unacceptable. The perpetrators of this vice must be dealt with decisively and in a timely manner in accordance with the law.

I am therefore resounding a clarion call to all community, religious and political leaders, law enforcement agencies like the Police, RDCs, Prosecutors to act tough against gender-based violence (#GBV) perpetrators. As human beings, let us collectively review the fight against Violence against women, children and #GBV in general.

While celebrating Women's day in Mbale on 8th March 2020, I made a passionate appeal to all frontline law enforcement teams and prosecutors not to regard cases of #GBV as mere domestic issues to be resolved in family meetings. The idea of turning away women assaulted/battered by their spouses at Police stations advising them to go and settle their grievances at home is illegal and unacceptable. There is nothing domestic, family and/or cultural to settle at home when it comes to inflicting harm on one's body.

Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development and its partners under the Global #Spotlight Initiative is re-launching a renewed fight against #GBV. Under this initiative, we are Strengthening capacity of seven pilot districts of Arua in West Nile, Amudat in Karamoja, Kampala in Central, Kasese and Kyegegwa in Western, Kitgum in Northern, and Tororo in the East in the prevention and response to #GBV. The specific activities in this include;

- i.** Training on prevention and response to GBV for the technical, political, cultural leadership and CSOs,
- ii.** Coordinating 13 GBV shelters in the districts of; Gulu, Lira, Masaka, Mbarara, Kumi, Katakwi, Amuru, Pallisa, Nebbi, Mubende, Kwen, Moroto and Kampala. The shelters provide psychosocial

support, legal aid, temporary shelter and first aid for GBV survivors before they are taken for medical care.

- iii.** The Ministry also established a national GBV database center for purposes of collecting and generating GBV data to inform decision-making.
- iv.** Facilitate stakeholder engagements for planning interventions on GBV,
- v.** Sensitization and dissemination of key messages to the local communities through media.

All community leaders must stand up against this vice. When the #Covid-19UG situation settles, we shall conduct a national conference for community development officers planned prior but postponed because of COVID-19. To re-sound the alarm at community level and re-awaken the CDOs who are always the first point victims of violence run to. The CDOs and other community leaders as well as many other volunteer activists against #GBV will be trained on how to track #GBV cases to the final stage of ensuring that victims get justice. We want to see all cases reported at Police by #GBV victims progressing to court for prosecution. We shall also partner with the media and train reporters on how to investigate and track cases of gender based violence so as to amplify the messages.

I wish to thank our partners namely the UN family agencies and many other CSO partners for the support towards this fight against #GBV. Let's fight #GBV as we also fight #COVID-19.

I want to caution all the frontline workers including the RDCs, Police, DISOs, GISOs, District Community Development Officers, Probation and Social Welfare

Officers and LCs, who are supposed to ensure the safety of all Ugandans in their respective jurisdictions, that as Government, we shall not entertain the *laissez-faire* attitude with which some of them handle cases of Sexual and Gender Based Violence, and Violence Against Children and women. Any one found condoning these acts will be sanctioned. You must ensure that such cases are handled expeditiously to guarantee justice to the victims. Stop normalizing domestic violence.

I also want to urge medical workers who attend to the survivors or victims of Gender Based Violence and Violence Against Children to be professional and ensure thorough medical examinations of the victims as a basis for investigation and legal action on the cases reported.

The general public is asked to stay on alert and report any cases of Gender Based Violence and Violence Against Children promptly to police, LCs or the Uganda Child/GBV toll-free Helpline Sauti 116.

Finally, I would like to commend the media fraternity for being one of the most reliable partners of Government in promoting the rights and wellbeing of the vulnerable people in this Country. We further thank you for your resilience in the ongoing fight against COVID 19.

FOR GOD AND MY COUNTRY