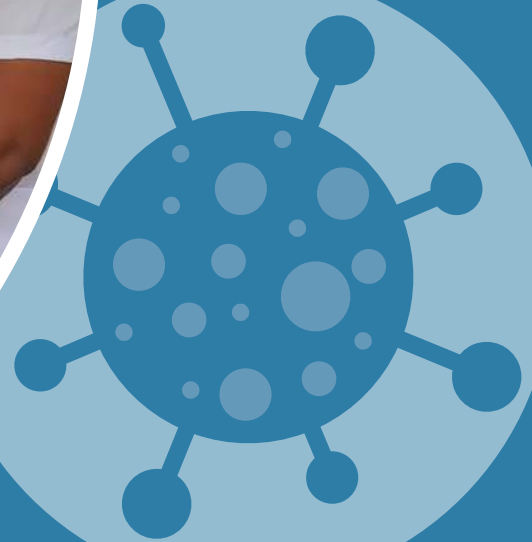




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## Covid-19 and Civic and Democratic Space

# NIGERIA

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing threats to civil and political rights in Nigeria. The federal government imposed a lockdown in major cities and states, declared a nationwide curfew, restricted gatherings, closed borders and shut schools and businesses, while many governors imposed similar measures at state level.

Lockdown measures caused severe hardship for millions of informal workers who depend on their daily earnings. Violence and extortion by police enforcing Covid-19 restrictions were widely documented. Women have been particularly impacted by the pandemic, with a surge in gender-based violence and a loss in incomes from the informal economy.

A **new law on infectious diseases** – the *Control of Infectious Diseases Bill 2020* – posed a serious threat to civil and political rights. The law would grant broad powers to officials and security services to restrict freedoms of movement and assembly and conduct warrantless searches and arrests. The bill is currently before the National Assembly of Nigeria.

## FACTS AND FIGURES



Covid-19 cases (as of 7 June 2021):  
**166,767<sup>1</sup>**



**No state of emergency was declared.**

The government has used emergency powers available under a law on infectious diseases.



Reported incidents of gender-based violence increased by **56%** in the first two weeks of the lockdown in April 2020.<sup>2</sup>

**Covid-19 vaccination at Esut Teaching Hospital Enugu, Nigeria**  
Credit: Andrea Onuoha, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons



Law enforcement personnel killed **29 people**

and unlawfully detained, extorted, tortured or mistreated dozens more during the lockdown from 31 March to 4 May 2020, according to the National Human Rights Commission.<sup>3</sup>



**3,789** prisoners were released to curb the potential spread of Covid-19 in overcrowded prisons.<sup>4</sup>



Nigeria received an IMF loan of **USD 3.4 billion** to address the economic impact of Covid-19 and the sharp fall in oil prices.

Credit: Theindigochild, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

## HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT OF COVID-19 MEASURES

### Freedom of Expression and Right to Information

**Attacks on the press** intensified during the pandemic. Journalists were harassed and detained while reporting on events related to Covid-19 and the lockdown. In April 2020, police detained two journalists in Ebonyi State on allegations of false reporting, relying in one case on a new state infectious diseases law.<sup>5</sup> 12 journalists were arrested in an office of the Nigeria Union of Journalists by police enforcing the Covid-19 lockdown.<sup>6</sup> In June 2020, a journalist was charged for reporting on the collapse of a Covid-19 isolation centre in Kogi State.<sup>7</sup>

The Office of the Accountant-General stated that all freedom of information requests about the spending of Covid-19 funds must be answered by government bodies within seven days of receiving the request, aligning with existing laws on the right to information. Nevertheless, full transparency and accountability for government spending in response to Covid-19 was lacking. In June 2020, the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project filed a case against the Nigerian government for “failure to account for the public funds and other resources so far spent and used to combat the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria.”<sup>8</sup>

### Freedom of Movement and Assembly

Police and soldiers have been accused of **violence, torture and misconduct** while enforcing lockdown measures. In several cases, excessive use of force by police and soldiers resulted in death. Women have also reported being assaulted and harassed by law enforcement officers enforcing Covid-19 measures.

A **ban on gatherings** of 50 or more people was implemented in March 2020, which restricted the right to protest. On 27 April 2020, police arrested 51 people protesting abusive enforcement of lockdown measures in Lagos State.<sup>9</sup> Health workers speaking out about the Covid-19 response were attacked by armed men in Kogi State in an attack widely blamed on the state government.<sup>10</sup>

**Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) and civil society organisations** were prevented from reaching victims of human rights violations and gender-based violence by Covid-19 restrictions on movement.

“Following these lockdown measures, Vision Spring Initiatives (VSI) received several reports of human rights violations which occurred in the context of enforcing the lockdown by the police and other law enforcement agencies. These violations include domestic violence and gender based violence. VSI staff were unable to reach the victims because of the movement restrictions.” – **Ngozi Nwosu Juba, Executive Director of Vision Spring Initiatives**

## Rule of Law

Courts were almost completely closed due to the virus and federal parliament took a month-long recess before resuming operations with severe restrictions on visitors and media. State governors were accused of overreaching their constitutional powers in their responses to the virus.<sup>11</sup> Some by-elections were postponed from March to October 2020 due to the virus.

## Economic and Social Rights

Measures taken to slow the spread of the virus had a disproportionate impact on poor people, particularly those who rely on their daily earnings to survive. Financial support measures, including a two-month conditional cash transfer, were inadequate and poorly managed. An estimated N 36.3 billion in Covid-19 donations was received from April to July 2020, but the Nigerian government has so far failed to provide detailed information about how these funds were spent, raising concerns of corruption and embezzlement.<sup>12</sup>

Access to sexual and reproductive health was negatively impacted during the Covid-19 pandemic.

“The new focus is on how to end the Covid-19, with total neglect of the sexual and reproductive health needs of young people. During this period [of the Covid-19 pandemic] two adolescent girls reported to Vision Spring Initiatives that they are pregnant and only got to know during the lock down. There must be other cases of unplanned pregnancies. There is acute shortage of sexual and reproductive health services.” – **Ngozi Nwosu Juba, Executive Director of Vision Spring Initiatives**

## The Impact of Covid-19 on Informal Workers

Gbenga Komolafe, the Secretary-General of the Federation of Informal Workers of Nigeria (FIWON), told ActionAid Nigeria that the enforcement of lockdown measures led to further marginalisation, stigmatisation and violence against informal workers, who make up 80 per cent of Nigeria’s population.<sup>13</sup>

Stay-at-home orders meant that informal workers were unable to work and they and their families suffered deprivation. Attempts to go out and earn a living were met violence and arbitrary arrests by police and other law enforcement agencies. Many street vendors and other informal workers are young people and police often targeted youths while enforcing lockdown measures.

Restrictions on movement prevented FIWON staff from intervening in cases where their members were arbitrarily detained, or their businesses were demolished. The closure of courts meant that FIWON was also unable to seek legal redress for its members. When multi-national companies took advantage of the lockdown to violate the rights of casual workers, FIWON could not picket the companies due to Covid-19 restrictions on gatherings.

## Gender-Based Violence

Stay-at-home orders issued in response to the Covid-19 virus contributed to a sharp increase in reports of sexual and gender-based violence in Nigeria.

“Many women and girls are locked down at home with perpetrators; husbands, brothers, neighbors and boyfriends. There is currently no means of accessing the few shelters around Nigeria due to the difficulty and imposition of lock down and the fear of infecting those at the facilities. Perpetrators cannot be taken to police stations due to lockdown. Life practically came to a halt.” – **Ngozi Nwosu Juba, Executive Director of Vision Spring Initiatives**

# NATIONAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Nigerian government should:

- target women and informal sector workers with financial support and services, acknowledging they are impacted first and worst by the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns;
- independently, promptly and thoroughly investigate allegations of excessive use of force and misconduct by law enforcement officials enforcing Covid-19 measures;
- ensure that media workers can carry out their journalistic functions without threats, harassment or intimidation, and are not prosecuted for their legitimate media work;
- take urgent steps to bring the Quarantine Act and Control of Infectious Diseases Bill 2020 into compliance with Nigeria’s obligations under international human rights law;
- combat the rise in gender-based violence by ensuring that the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 is promptly passed into law by all 36 states in Nigeria and providing sufficient funding for domestic violence shelters; and
- ensure any restrictions on rights for public health reasons are lawful, necessary, and proportionate. They must be based on scientific evidence, neither arbitrary nor discriminatory in application, of limited duration and formulated narrowly and precisely.

## Endnotes

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