



Covid-19 and Civic and Democratic Space

ZIMBABWE

Civil and political rights are routinely violated in Zimbabwe, where the space for dissenting voices is narrowing. The Covid-19 pandemic provided a pretext to clamp down on human rights defenders, activists and opposition politicians.

In response to the virus, President Mnangagwa declared a 'state of disaster' on 17 March 2020 and ordered a 21-day national lockdown from 30 March. The lockdown was slightly eased and extended indefinitely on 16 May 2020, with a further easing of restrictions in July 2020. Another national lockdown was declared on 2 January 2021.

Restrictions on freedom of movement had a disproportionate impact on women, who reported higher levels of gender-based violence and who were more likely to suffer economic hardship due to their reliance on the informal sector.

FACTS AND FIGURES



Covid-19 cases (as of 23 April 2021):

37,980²



A "state of disaster" was declared in response to the Covid-19 pandemic on **17 March 2020**.



At least **20 journalists** were harassed, arbitrarily arrested or assaulted by police and soldiers in the first six months of the national lockdown.³

A young graduate at a protest in Harare. Photo credit: The Zimbabwean Mail¹



The national gender-based violence hotline recorded an increase of **over 60%** in calls during the lockdown.⁴



538 cases of arbitrary arrests and detentions were recorded in the first six months of the national lockdown, with the majority accused of violating Covid-19 regulations.⁵



The government announced a stimulus package of **ZWL 500 million** (USD 20 million) in response to the pandemic and **ZWL 200 million** (USD 8 million) per month in cash transfers to an estimated one million vulnerable households.⁶

Police and armed forces attacked and harassed informal traders during the lockdown. Photo credit: NewZimlive⁷

HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT OF COVID-19 MEASURES

Freedom of Expression and Right to Information

Journalists were harassed and arrested while working during the lockdown, despite the media being classified as an 'essential service'. Two journalists, Frank Chikowore and Samuel Takawira, were arrested on 22 May 2020 and charged with violating the Covid-19 lockdown while they were investigating the abduction of three opposition activists.⁸

Access to information about the pandemic and related restrictions was limited. Civil society organisations reported a lack of consultation with relevant stakeholders before decisions were made and insufficient information on how to access government funds.

Lockdown regulations published in March 2020 included a provision subjecting any person who spreads **false news** about the lockdown with fines and jail terms of up to 20 years, endangering both the right to freedom of expression and access to information about the virus.

Freedom of Assembly and Movement

Incidents of **harassment, violence and arbitrary arrest** by police and soldiers enforcing Covid-19 related restrictions on movement were widely reported.

A **ban on gatherings** of two or more people, later increased to 50, restricted the right to protest. On 6 July 2020, police in Harare arrested 13 nurses protesting for better pay and working conditions, accusing them of violating Covid-19 lockdown regulations.⁹

"We were protesting against the holding of some public hearings into the proposed constitutional amendments during the lockdown... We were arrested and charged with participating in a gathering with intent to promote public violence, breaches of the peace or bigotry. I was detained and during the arrest I was harassed. It took me a long time to be granted bail. When I was

granted bail there was further harassment. I had to report three times a week at Borrowdale Police station which meant I had to get a taxi and find routes that evaded checkpoints in order to be compliant. Being unemployed this was a huge strain on the little resources I had.” – **Female Human Rights Defender**

Restrictions on freedom of movement and inadequate public transport, which was limited due to the pandemic, created challenges for **people with disabilities**. Some people were unable to travel to health care providers who could cater to their specific needs, such as communicating using sign language.

“The lockdown was implemented in a way that did not consider different needs of people with disabilities in the society. Imagine a woman who is hard of hearing who requires family planning services and having to go to a local clinic where they have no one who is competent in sign language”. – **Interviewee, Deaf Zimbabwe Trust**

Freedom of Association

Lockdowns, curfews and other restrictions in response to the pandemic obstructed the **activities of civil society groups**. Only organisations providing services considered “essential” were allowed exemptions from some Covid-19 restrictions.

“When the lockdown was imposed at a professional level we could not move around because we were not classified as essential services. However, that meant that if we needed to assist people to access justice, we would not be able to do so. The Court in theory was only supposed to handle “urgent” matters but that did not happen. With regards to our clients, some were expected to report to the police on a weekly basis but movement restrictions meant they couldn’t. If they violated reporting requirements due to lockdown restrictions then a warrant of arrest would be issued against them.” – **Interviewee, Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights**.

Rule of Law & Protection of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs)

Several HRDs were arrested on charges related to the lockdown for their legitimate and important work in holding authorities to account. While repression of HRDs is a long-standing issue in Zimbabwe, the pandemic and related restrictions provided a pretext for **arrests, harassment and violence**.

In May 2020, three women activists from Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance, Joana Mamombe, Cecilia Chimbiri and Netsai Marova, disappeared. They were detained by police on their way to a protest against the government’s response to the Covid-19 outbreak and hunger and found over 48 hours later in a remote area outside Harare. They accused police of their abduction, sexual assault and torture.¹⁰

Economic and Social Rights

70% of people in Zimbabwe rely on the **informal sector** for their income. Measures taken to slow the spread of the virus thrust informal workers, many of them women and young people, into economic hardship. The closure of borders impacted those working in cross-border trading between Zimbabwe and South Africa. Police and armed forces harassed and attacked informal traders during the lockdown, in some cases demolishing trading spaces and destroying goods.¹¹ When informal traders were allowed to reopen, they were required to formally register their businesses.

“With the sudden lockdown I just found myself without anyone to sell to. I have a physical disability and getting around is already a challenge. During the lockdown some neighbours would walk long distances to either replenish their wares or to sell. I could not do that. That meant I had to be stuck at home with three children to feed and no source of income. When I managed to get transport, letters were needed to enable me to pass checkpoints and I did not have one. They said only essential services were allowed but travelling in order to try and get something to feed myself and my family was not considered. Since I am not formally employed, I could not get a letter from employers which some people used. To make matters worse some people started to sell fake letters for USD30 but I did not have that kind of money.” – **Angela, Disability Rights Activist and Vendor**

Gender-Based Violence

Restrictions on movement limited the ability of women facing violence to seek help for **gender-based violence**, which increased during the pandemic.

“The lockdown had serious effects on the people we serve, specifically survivors of sexual violence. There was a woman who was being physically and sexually abused by her husband during the lockdown. When she tried to go to the clinic she could not be allowed to pass through the checkpoint. In addition, the police manning checkpoints did not allow her to report to them. Three times she was turned back. Finally, she called the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights hotline and they had to assist to make sure that she reported and she was referred for clinical services with us.” – **Memory Kadau, Adult Rape Clinic**

Access to sexual and reproductive health and information was disrupted due to the Covid-19 lockdown, and young women and girls were more likely to take on caregiving and domestic responsibilities given the closure of educational institutions and places of work. Young women and girls were also more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence within the home.

NATIONAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Zimbabwe government should:

- prioritise respect for civil and political rights through appropriate legal reform and respect for divergent opinions;
- invest in training/reorientation of law enforcement agents to ensure that they desist from arbitrary arrests as well as harassment of citizens under the guise of law enforcement;
- remove legal and operational barriers to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, including the right to information;
- consult widely with stakeholders in relation to their response to the Covid-19 pandemic and ensure access to information about its response;
- ensure that its interventions consider people with disabilities so that there is no disproportionate impact of Covid-19 measures on this group of people; and
- prioritise support towards the informal sector and remove barriers to its operations, given the serious impact of the pandemic on this sector.

Endnotes

1. <https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/newzimlive/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/21045632/Graduate-Vendors.jpg>
2. <https://covid19.who.int/region/afro/country/zw>
3. <http://kubatana.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/180-Days-of-What-lr.pdf>
4. <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/zimbabwe/card/2XxB9GOV93/>
5. <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/zimbabwe/card/2XxB9GOV93/>
6. <https://www.zw.undp.org/content/zimbabwe/en/home/library/a-preliminary-assessment-of-the-socio-economic-impact-of-corona.html>
7. <https://i1.wp.com/www.thezimbabwemail.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Vendor-.png?resize=678%2C381&ssl=1>
8. <https://cpj.org/2020/06/two-zimbabwean-journalists-charged-with-violating-covid-19-lockdown/>
9. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/07/zimbabwe-authorities-must-drop-charges-against-health-care-workers-for-demanding-better-wages/>
10. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/05/zimbabwe-drop-bogus-charges-against-opposition-leaders-who-suffered-sexual-assault/>
11. <https://www.herald.co.zw/lockdown-police-confiscate-vegetables/>

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