

## **TOTAL LOCKDOWN IS HARD FOR THE CHIDEFEA WOMEN.**

Before Covid-19, the women of the CHIDEFEA women group were doing great. With the support of Mirembe Foundation, they had continued to rise to stardom, become fully empowered and supported their families. As usual in November, new loans were given to the women with a grace period of one month (December 2019) for their small businesses., In 2020 January and February, they made their loan repayments promptly not anticipating anything. Little did they know that the situation could suddenly **CHANGE**, last long, taking away with it what they had so far achieved. Given the difficult circumstances that lockdown has caused around the world and Uganda in this case – financial instability, social isolation, and psychological hardship, “The coronavirus pandemic has inevitably resulted in many negative and long term impacts” for the CHIDEFEA women.

After spending three months in lockdown, today 15/06/2020, the TUL team ventured out to meet the women group at Ggaba landing site. Due to the measures of not having more than 10 people per gathering, the meeting had only 7 participants (both from TUL and CHIDEFEA). As we approached the usual lively stalls of the women, we were shocked to be welcomed by flooded stalls on total lockdown. A mood of sombreness and anxiety washed over us. One can already imagine the situation for these vulnerable ladies!

### **CHALLENGES FACED BY CHIDEFEA WOMEN GROUP DUE TO THE CURRENT PANDEMIC AND CRISIS.**

**Hunger and Starvation;** The women have been on lockdown for three months now, they have to stay at home, they are not working and have nothing to feed their families on. They did not anticipate that the lockdown would last long and have gone to the extent of using their business capital to feed their families. The ladies agreed and also distributed the savings among themselves in order to buy food to survive and pay rent but since the lockdown is not ending, the situation is just getting worse.

Some of the women are HIV positive but have no food to eat in order to take their medicines, they also have no transport to hospitals since they are not working yet transport charges have more than doubled. They are following the government directive of keeping at home because they are not essential workers and are struggling to survive. They may not die from COVID 19, but they may die from hunger and starvation.

**Floods and rise in water levels due to the huge impact of climate change;** “The current rise in Lake Victoria water level started on 1st October 2019 and has consistently gone up from 12.00 meters to the current level of 13.32 meters as of 30th April 2020. This is a rise of 1.32 meters attained in only 6 months and the level is only 0.08 meters away from the highest level ever recorded”- Ministry of Environment, Uganda.



This has led to flooding for areas surrounding Lake Victoria. We were welcomed by this unpleasant sight that has displaced the women from their stalls. The government has actually gazetted off this area to prevent accidents from occurring. With the help of a policeman, we were able to access the area to take a picture of the stalls. One can use a canoe/small boat to reach the place. The floods have led to uncertainties for the women, they do not know if the lockdown is lifted what will happen because they are not working anymore. They have been threatened with eviction from the area that is now considered dangerous and government also now wants to take charge.



The floods have also forced some women out of their homes because it is not safe to live their anymore. They had to move to another cheaper house for rent using their savings and capital. Please note that some of these ladies had bought plots and constructed small houses that they called "HOME". With the floods, amidst lockdown and with the urge to stay safe and prevent the spread of the coronavirus, "home is no more". This has led to stress and trauma for some women. They already have food to worry about and now even the shelter is gone.

**Diseases;** The flooded water has become a breeding area for parasites leading to diseases such as malaria, water-borne diseases such as typhoid and bilharzia among others. Easily spread due to hardship in getting clean and safe drinking water,.

Mercy a little girl and daughter to Miss Katushabe Christine had her feet rotten due to the dirty water. To make matters worse, Katushabe is struggling to feed her family because her husband had a stroke. The same family was displaced by water. The situation is so hard. CHIDEFEA was able to buy a portable toilet for the husband of Katushabe. Katushabe says that she does not know how her family will survive for long because they have no food and she is under lockdown and although she may go back to work, her capital is done and the place she called home and the stall for business are gone. The story is not different for most women in CHIDEFEA. They are living in a hopeless situation.



The untimely death of one of the key group leaders, a one Semwanga Teopista (RIP), she was an active member paying her loans very well. CHIDEFEA is likely to make a loss here because initially, they did not consider what would happen to the loan if a member died. This is a new experience for them.

**Social distancing has led to individualism;** To remain safe, social distancing is emphasized and the women are keeping this regulation. But also this has led to stress for some women facing these woes all alone. They cannot empower each other; they are not qualified to use social media or zoom to talk to each other. Buying phone credit cannot even be a priority if the children keep telling you that “mom, I am hungry” yet you have nothing to offer but sometimes one meal a day or even water to survive, said one of the women. The situation is grave and needs urgent consideration and attention.

Ever since the beginning, these women have been paying their loans well but times are now tough and strange, the economy is bad, they are not working and have dependents. The women may totally be down now but the biggest lesson from this crisis for them is that they have learned the importance of their savings, so they were a bit prepared for the situation. They thought the lockdown would be short-lived but since it has lasted so long, they also used their savings to survive but were not prepared for bigger circumstances like floods which was beyond their control, moreover they are still on lockdown. The capital and savings are gone.

Nobody knows how long the lockdown will last. Even once the lockdown is lifted, it's worth bearing in mind that the disruptions to their lives caused by the coronavirus outbreak could last indefinitely for some women.

For non-essential workers (including Ggaba women), lock has not ended and we are anticipating another lockdown according to what is said by government officials, CHIDEFEA might need an extra hand to help the women and their children to survive and later on give them a fresh boost for their businesses. For now, the group is appealing to Mirembe to help them with food relief support to help the women survive this pandemic and lockdown. As leaders, they are seeing the women suffering but are not able to help them.

The women were grateful to Tusaidiane Uganda for their visit.