



# FIGHTING COVID-19: AJWS's Human Rights Response to the Global Pandemic

## A GLOBAL PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

The COVID-19 pandemic is proliferating in all 18 countries AJWS serves, wreaking havoc on a catastrophic scale. The pandemic is disrupting and destroying lives everywhere, but we know from our 35 years of experience responding to disasters that this crisis poses an existential threat to the vulnerable communities AJWS supports across Africa, Asia, Central America and the Caribbean.

The pandemic is magnifying inequality between rich and poor in devastating ways, and igniting an increased rise in authoritarianism, bigotry and violence in the communities where we work:

- Education about and access to vaccines remains severely limited, even as vaccines are abundant in wealthier countries.
- People living in slums or refugee camps are unable to observe social distancing.
- Impoverished countries lack healthcare and economic infrastructure to weather the crisis.
- Lockdowns have cut off vital food and supplies, and many governments have failed to provide financial relief.
- Leaders have circulated misinformation about how the virus spreads and blamed the pandemic on minorities—sparking assaults and arrests.
- Authoritarian regimes are abusing their power—muzzling the press and backing legislation that threatens human rights.

### SPOTLIGHT: SUCCESS IN THE FIGHT FOR UNIVERSAL VACCINE ACCESS

When the **Dominican Republic's** government rolled out a vaccination campaign that cruelly left out vast swaths of the country's population, including migrant workers and black Dominicans of Haitian descent, AJWS grantee Caribbean Migrants Observatory (OBMICA) fought back against this blatant discrimination. They built a movement of activists pushing for universal vaccine access across the country — and it worked. After OBMICA met public health officials, Vice President Raquel Peña de Antuña's administration committed to supporting vaccines for all, and even launched mobile vaccination centers to reach remote communities across the island.

## AJWS'S EMERGENCY RESPONSE

When COVID-19 emerged, AJWS was well-positioned to respond—due to our experience rising to the challenges of Ebola and decades of responding to other emergencies. We nimbly shifted our support of our 502 grantees so they could battle the pandemic and defend human rights under threat. Our focus is on the dual imperatives to save lives in the short-term and protect human rights in the long-term, acting on our Jewish responsibility to repair the world and protect the inherent human dignity of all people.

### ●●●● AJWS'S COVID-19 RESPONSE HAS FOUR PILLARS:

#### ● Addressing Urgent Humanitarian Needs

We are enabling organizations to provide threatened communities with desperately needed aid. When COVID-19 first struck, our grantees distributed emergency food, personal protective equipment and other essentials. Now, AJWS is investing in the long-

term wellbeing of these communities by ensuring that they have enduring sources of food and that they can access key services, like reproductive health care and psychosocial support.

#### ●● Spreading Life-Saving Information

Because many communities lack accurate information about COVID-19—due to false reporting and limited internet access—AJWS developed a toolkit on infection prevention in 10 languages to help our grantees spread safety information via the radio, loudspeakers and social

media. Further, AJWS is supporting networks of local journalists to provide their communities with accurate COVID-19 coverage. Our grantees have the complete trust of their communities, making them vital messengers of life-saving information.

### ●●● Building More Sustainable Communities

The pandemic has led to job loss globally, and families increasingly cannot afford food, medical care and other necessities. AJWS grantees are supporting their communities to become more resilient—developing alternative sources of livelihood, producing their own food, accessing local markets to sell homemade goods and more, so they can not only survive this crisis, but become better prepared for whatever lies ahead.

### ●●●● Advocating for the Rights of the Most Vulnerable

AJWS grantees have launched powerful advocacy campaigns to ensure their governments are accountable and responsive to the needs of their people—equitably distributing relief funding, improving protections for frontline healthcare workers and more. The activists we support are also battling discrimination that bars minorities from hospitals and fighting oppressive laws passed under the guise of containing the virus. To amplify the advocacy of these global activists, our staff in Washington, D.C. are calling upon Congress, the State Department, fellow funders and international institutions to support policies that protect the most vulnerable people caught in the crossfires of COVID-19.

To learn more about AJWS's COVID-19 response and to donate to help us fight the pandemic, please visit [www.ajws.org/coronavirus](http://www.ajws.org/coronavirus).

## AJWS GRANTEES IN ACTION AROUND THE WORLD

### ■ Flattening the curve through PPE and vaccines:

In India, AJWS grantee Kashtakari Panchayat (KP)

supports women “waste-pickers,” essential workers who clean garbage and recycling from the streets. During the massive Delta surge of spring 2021, KP supplied over 3,500 women with PPE to protect themselves, and organized mobile vaccine clinics just for this community, so they can work safely, and without fear, to support their families.



### PROVIDING UNWAVERING AND FLEXIBLE SUPPORT

AJWS is continuing our support to all 502 of our grantees and increasing our grants to those fighting COVID-19 directly. We have shifted to flexible general operating support so these organizations can respond to emergencies and adapt their work to this rapidly changing landscape.

### ■ Reducing violence against women:

With domestic abuse surging around the world as people are unable to leave their homes, grassroots organizations are providing a lifeline for women and girls. In **Senegal**, AJWS grantee *Association des Juristes Sénégalaises (AJS)* is providing psychosocial support to women suffering domestic violence-related trauma; they also opened phone lines for women to declare instances of domestic violence linked to the pandemic.

### ■ Fighting unlawful arrests:

After 23 homeless LGBTQI+ youth in **Uganda** were violently imprisoned and falsely charged with spreading COVID-19, AJWS grantee Human Rights and Awareness Promotion Forum (HRAPF) mobilized emergency legal support. HRAPF fought relentlessly as the youth were held without bail and violently harassed. Two months later, the charges were dropped and the young people were finally freed. Uganda's High Court ruled that the youth were denied inalienable human rights—and awarded them each significant financial restitution.

*Center photo: After successfully convincing their government to support vaccines for all, OBMICA's coalition of civil society organizations and activists spread into communities to lead public vaccination campaigns. Photo courtesy of OBMICA.*

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