

An Assessment of the

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE JUDICIARY



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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This assessment was made possible through the dedicated efforts of several individuals and organizations committed to the rule of law and judicial efficiency in Nigeria.

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Supported by:

The Macarthur Foundation

We express our sincere gratitude to the MacArthur Foundation for their continued support of initiatives aimed at promoting transparency, accountability, and the effective administration of criminal justice in Nigeria.

The findings and recommendations in this report are intended to serve as a roadmap for judicial and executive policymakers to strategize on improving service delivery and protecting the rights of all citizens, particularly in challenging periods of transition.

Introduction

The outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Wuhan, China, and its meteoric spread to all parts of the world has created a public health emergency of unprecedented proportions.

The Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO) in his opening remarks at a media briefing on COVID-19 on March 11, 2020 declared it a global pandemic and stated as follows: "this is not just a public health crisis, it is a crisis that will touch every sector – so every sector and every individual must be involved in the fight."

As at April 21 2020, there were 2,810,325 confirmed COVID-19 cases globally, with 193,825 deaths. In Nigeria, the number of confirmed cases are 1273 with 40 deaths. However, beyond the debilitating impact of the pandemic on the health systems of both developed and developing countries, the political, economic and social consequences of the outbreak on all nations are unparalleled.

There are several researches aimed at unravelling the impact of COVID-19 on the various sectors of governance and economy. This assessment aims at highlighting the impact of the pandemic on the judicial sector in general, and its impact on women as it relates to speedy trials and dispensation of justice in cases of sexual and gender-based violence in particular.

In addition, the socio-economic consequences and the significance of

Government responses to the pandemic and implications for the judiciary

having women in decision-making positions will be explored.

The legislative powers in the federation are vested in the National Assembly, made up of the Senate and the House of Representatives and the various state Houses of Assembly.

The existence of the Quarantine Act in the Laws of the Federation 2004 meant that the National Assembly was not required or didn't deem it necessary to pass any new law in response to the pandemic. However, some State Assemblies hurriedly put in place some form of legal framework to guide responses to the outbreak.

Issuance of regulations regarding restrictions by the Executive

The responsibility of tackling the COVID-19 pandemic through policy prescriptions and the issuance of regulations fell squarely on the executive arm of government. With the identification of the index case in Ogun state, the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) took responsibility for tracing contacts, collection and testing of samples in designated laboratories and sensitising the general public on hygienic practices of hand-washing with soap, and the use of hand sanitizers. Given the potency for rapid transmission by the virus, social distancing was recommended as a way of curbing its spread.

The President in exercise of his powers under Sections 2,3, and 4 of the Quarantine Act, Cap. Q2, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004, and with a view to limiting physical interaction among persons made the COVID-19 Regulations of 2020.

The Regulations, dated March 30, 2020 sought to restrict movements of people in the Federal Capital Territory, Lagos and Ogun states where many cases of the virus had been confirmed. However, all those involved in the provision of essential services were exempted from the restrictions.

They include hospital and medical establishments; food processing, distribution and retail companies; petroleum distribution and retail entities; power generation, transmission and distribution companies; law enforcement agencies and private security companies. Many state governments followed suit and made regulations closing interstate borders, while announcing further measures to limit social interaction and curtail the spread of the virus.

Special task forces were set up at various levels to coordinate the fight against the pandemic, while isolation centres were established to cater for the needs of individuals who have tested positive to the virus.

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Grant of amnesty and release of inmates of correctional centres

In response to the clamour by civil society organisations which highlighted detainees and inmates as a class of people vulnerable to the spread of the virus, the government initiated a process to decongest the crowded correctional centres across the country.

As at April 11, 2020, the population of inmates in the various correctional centres in Nigeria was 74,127, out of which 52,226 were awaiting trial. The government in an effort to decongest the custodial centres and discourage the spread of the virus granted amnesty to a total of 2,600 inmates.

The beneficiaries are made up of elderly inmates above 60 years; inmates suffering from ill health that could be terminal; inmates sentenced to 3 years and above and have less than 6 months to serve; inmates with mental health issues; and inmates with options of fine not exceeding 50,000 naira.

This exercise was carried out by executive fiat in the light of the urgency of the situation and considering the length of time it would have taken the courts to deal with the cases individually.

The Attorney General of the Federation then wrote the state governors to implement the presidential initiative in respect of convicts of state offences. This represents a bold and necessary step on the part of the executive to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the justice sector. The release of the inmates will definitely result in the decongestion of the custodial centres, an ideal the judiciary strives to advance in the performance of their duties.

Suspension of court sittings by the Judiciary

The pandemic represents a great challenge for the judiciary in carrying out its mandate of adjudication and resolution of disputes between parties and protecting the rights of individuals. Indeed, even in a period of crisis, where there are many risks at stake for the health of the population, it is important to ensure a proper administration of justice.

The major challenge before the courts is how, for instance, can they dispense justice, while adhering to the prescriptions that would limit the transmission of the virus to judges, lawyers, court staff, litigants and members of the public. As part of the emergency measures taken in response to the coronavirus outbreak, many courts across the world have been forced to close down or to devise alternative ways of working.

The Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN) Tanko Mohammed by a circular ordered the suspension of all court sittings across the country, except for the hearing of cases that are urgent, essential or time-bound in accordance with existing laws. Citing the above circular, the Acting President of the Court of Appeal Justice Monica Dongban-Mensem, directed presiding justices of the various divisions of the court to adjudicate only matters relating to criminal and election petition appeals and time bound cases. In addition, notice was given by the Chief Registrar of the court requiring counsel to utilise electronic means in filing cases and communicating with the court.

The Chief Judges of the respective states and the Federal Capital Territory also issued directives suspending court sittings except for urgent cases. The effect of the suspension of court sittings is that all cases that were

slated for hearing within the period of the suspension will not be heard.

This applies also to cases that have been filed but hearings are yet to commence, and to cases which cause of action arose within the period of suspension, but cannot be filed owing to the restrictions imposed by the regulations issued to contain the spread of the virus.

The consequence of this, is a backlog that will test the limits of the courts, bearing in mind that the system is already bedevilled by protracted trials and undue delay. Justice delayed, they say, is justice denied.



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Exploring the efficiency and effectiveness of the judiciary in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic

Suspension of court sittings

Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, courts were labouring under overloaded dockets and casefiles. The closure of the courts arising from measures aimed at curbing the pandemic will no doubt exacerbate the problem.

The closure of the courts also has a negative corresponding impact on awaiting trial detainees as hearings that may lead to their release from custody are stalled. Depending on how long the courts remain closed, the reopening of the courts will create nightmarish scenarios as judges, court staff, lawyers and litigants battle to reschedule hearings that could not take place during the lockdown.

The need to try violators of the various restriction orders across the country meant that both regular and mobile courts could sit for that purpose. There have been divergent views as to the legality/constitutionality or otherwise of some of these regulations and the only way to determine it would be through a legal challenge in court.

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However, with the courts shut down, what options are left for an aggrieved person who is interested in challenging any action taken under the regulations? In Malawi, the court has granted an injunction suspending the implementation of the restrictions sought to be imposed by the government. The suspension of court sittings in Nigeria without detailed arrangements for remote hearings and mitigating measures no doubt negatively impact the efficiency and effectiveness of the judiciary as an institution.

Lack of ICT infrastructure to enable alternative means of conducting court proceedings

Many countries are mitigating the effects of court closures by using technology, including electronic trials, to replace traditional court hearings.

However, the utilisation of technological advancements to conduct court proceedings is dependent of the existence of necessary infrastructure including, but not limited to computer hardware, internet bandwidth, software, power supply and ICT- compliant staff to implement the solutions.

this is clearly lacking in the Nigerian judicial system. According to the President of the Nigerian Bar Association Paul Usoro, "the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed on us an immediate and welcome review of our

justice administration processes and methods. Without a doubt, we have been stuck in analogue mode for so long, to our extreme and untold detriment.

We must deliberately and urgently introduce and institutionalise the use of technology in, and for our justice administration.” The absence of necessary technological infrastructure and human capital to deploy ICT- based alternatives to physical court hearing greatly inhibits the ability of the judiciary to effectively dispense justice for the entire duration of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Non-categorisation of judicial stakeholders as essential service providers

Although section 1 (7) of the Regulations issued by the President provides that court matters that are urgent, essential and time-bound according to our extant laws are also exempted in line with the Chief Justice of Nigeria's Circular No. NJC/CIR/HOC/11G31 of 23rd March 2020, the failure to expressly include judges, court staff and lawyers in the categories of persons exempted from the restrictions represents a grave omission with grave consequences for the judicial sector. This is against the background of the statement issued on April 1, 2020 by the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) alleging undue harassment of medical doctors and other health workers with valid identification. In Delta state, the Association of Resident Doctors (ARD) at the Federal Medical Centre Asaba had withdrawn their services indefinitely on account of the harassment of their members

by security operatives enforcing the lockdown in the state. This overzealousness by law enforcement officers is despite the express exemption of medical staff from the restrictions imposed by the Regulations issued by the president. If this is the situation in respect of a group expressly exempted, what then will become of court staff and lawyers who are not expressly exempted in the regulations.

In Kenya, a High Court presided over by Justice W. Korir has ruled that lawyers in the country be exempted from the restrictions imposed by the government to control the spread of coronavirus. This followed a petition jointly filed by the Law Society of Kenya (LSK) and supported by the Kenyan National Commission on Human Rights, International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), Independent Police Oversight Authority (IPOA) and Party Legal Advice Centre requesting that the justice system and legal representation be listed as essential services.

The non-categorisation of judges, lawyers and judicial staff as essential service providers in the regulations issued by the president, will in no small measure, limit the effective dispensation of justice by the judiciary.



Enforcement of human rights by the judiciary

In Nigeria, the preponderance of human rights violations in Nigeria are carried out by state officials, particularly, law enforcement officials. In a bid to enforce compliance with the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 Regulations, police officers and other law enforcement agencies may overstep their bounds and infringe on the rights of citizens.

The National Human Rights Commission said it had received and documented a total of 105 complaints of incidents of human rights violations, including extra-judicial killings perpetrated by security forces in 24 of the 36 states of the federation and the FCT during the initial 14-day lockdown.

The Commission noted that the 18 deaths arising from these incidents is higher than the recorded number of deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic. Governments or other powerful authorities have no power to take away human rights at will. A judge who is called upon to enforce or protect human rights must appreciate that he or she has a sacred duty to perform not only on behalf of the claimant but on behalf of all humanity. This underscores the need for a functional judicial system in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several states have hurriedly set up or designated mobile courts to hear and determine breaches of the restriction orders issued by the president and the various state governments. The operations of mobile courts come with its own challenges which include, but is not limited to the failure to observe due process and fair trial rights.

They are: the right to life; right to dignity of human person; right to fair hearing within a reasonable time which includes the right to be presumed innocent until he is proved guilty; to be given adequate time and facilities for the preparation of his defence; to defend himself in person or by a legal practitioner of his own choice; to examine the witnesses of the prosecution and to call his own witnesses; and to have the assistance of an interpreter without payment if he does not understand the language of the court.

Since the mobile courts are presided over by magistrates and the enforcement of fundamental rights fall under the purview of the High Court pursuant to the Constitution, it limits the ability of suspects accused of violating the restrictions to enforce their rights since most of the High Courts have been closed and registries are not open for the filing of rights enforcement applications.

This, coupled with the non-designation of lawyers as essential service providers seriously inhibits the ability of the citizens to access the courts and the judiciary to perform their constitutional responsibility of protecting the rights of individuals who are accused of restriction violations, and others whose rights have been violated by overzealous security operatives.

In addition, it is noteworthy that due process rights are non-derogable and under no circumstances, including in times of war can they be taken away.

Another pertinent issue to be noted is that most of the mobile courts were set up by agencies of the executive arm of government. This amounts to a brazen violation of the hallowed principle of separation of powers.

According to the Nigerian Bar Association Bwari Branch, "we find it bizarre that the Directorate of Road Traffic Services (DRTS) and the Abuja Environmental Protection Board (AEPB) would be the ones leading the setting up of mobile courts in the FCT.

This is a brazen abuse of office and usurpation of the powers of the judiciary." Persons convicted by these courts may file appeals against the judgments and overturn the sentences on the basis of non-compliance with the provisions of the constitution.

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Gender analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Apart from the general impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the society in general, and the judiciary in particular, there are some gender dimensions of this impact that need to be explored in order to unearth the inequalities that manifest therefrom.

Gender considerations in the issuance of guidelines (Crèche facilities now that schools are closed) for essential service providers.

For workers in all sectors of the economy, the closure of offices and schools represents a step towards stemming the tide of infections. The category of persons designated as providers of essential services will continue to go to work. While work and school were going on concurrently, there was no need to make arrangements for domestic childcare.

What then becomes of a mother who is an essential service provider, who needs to go to work, but has children that need to be attended to at home? This presents a real dilemma because arrangements for childcare are expensive and the restriction of movement serves to limit the range of choice available to such a person. This might also expose their children to SGBV.

Socio-economic impact - Unpaid care work and income for daily-earner households and women most impacted

Besides unpaid care work that majority of women engage in at home, there are a lot of women who are engaged in the informal labour and business sectors. While some are engaged in daily paid artisanal work, others engage in trading with the meagre capital they are able to raise. This provides daily income for their subsistence.

The outbreak of COVID-19 and the consequential lockdown means that these women cannot go out to earn a living to sustain themselves and their family. Survival has become a precarious reality in many states. For states with partial lockdown, such women still go out to work to earn a living, thereby exposing themselves to the risk of contracting the virus. The distribution of inadequate palliatives items provided by the government in some areas have been problematic.

Some have ended in free-for-all struggles and women have come out the worse for it.

Speedy dispensation of justice

The cases that are stalled in the various courts following the outbreak of the pandemic includes cases involving women. Such cases include divorce, maintenance, custody, restraining orders and trial of perpetrators of SGBV.

The situation may become precarious for some women who have no means of livelihood and are compelled to remain with abusive partners pending the outcome of the proceedings.

The delay occasioned by the lockdown may portend grave consequences for some women whose cases are pending in court. For example, women in shelters awaiting the outcome of trials or civil cases for maintenance or restraining orders.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Cases

Incidences of sexual and gender-based violence pervades our society. This can be traced to gender inequalities and stereotypes which have been sustained over a long period of time. Increasingly, homes are no longer safe for women and girls as it has also become a theatre of violence.

The risk of SGBV is therefore heightened in the context of the pandemic where women must stay with abusers for extended periods of time. This much is recognised by the UN Secretary General when he stated as follows: 'We know lockdowns and quarantines are essential to suppressing COVID-19, but they can trap women with abusive partners.'

Over the past weeks as economic and social pressures and fear have grown, we have seen a horrifying global surge in domestic violence." In Nigeria, a report released by an NGO observed a 64% rise in gender-based violence during the initial 14-day lockdown.

The restrictions imposed by government will limit the ability of abused women to access services like Sexual Assault Referral Centres, law enforcement agencies, shelters and of course, the courts.

Cases of human rights violations

Women have been known to suffer various forms of human rights violations including, but not limited to discrimination, torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, property, movement etc. Some of the violations are arise from entrenched patriarchal structures in the society.

Reports from different parts of the country indicate that women have also been at the receiving end of rights abuses from security officials enforcing the lockdown. Some have been flogged, beaten, become victims of extortion etc. Several videos showing women being abused or extorted have gone viral on various social media platforms.

The restrictions render mechanisms of accountability for rights violations, including the judiciary inaccessible to women representing unintended consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Impact of the pandemic on the financial resources, workforce and judicial institutions

Unravelling the full impact of the pandemic on the financial resources, workforce and judicial institutions requires a much deeper analysis and data collection. However, some are salient enough not to be omitted. The congestion in the appellate courts are so glaring given that adjournments are now being scheduled as far as 2021 and 2022.

With all the workload facing the Supreme Court, the number of justices has fallen to an all-time-low of twelve following retirements and death. Reacting to this anomaly, human rights lawyer Femi Falana has called on the President

to, " in the interest of justice and the health of the remaining justices make the appointments without any further delay." Even if the President makes the appointments, because of the lockdown arising from COVID-19, replacements cannot be made because even the Senate that has the responsibility of approving such appointments is not in session.

The closure of the courts resulting from the COVID pandemic means that cases are not being filed and filing fees are not being paid. this is negatively impacting on the volume of revenue being generated from not just filing fees but other processes like oath fees, probate fees and the like. A shortfall in projected revenue generation from the judiciary is therefore expected. It is also left to be seen what impact the closure of courts will have on the legal year calendar.



Recommendations of best-practices for more efficient and effective judicial service-delivery

01

Holding hearings that comply with social distancing guidelines

The total shut down of the court system is neither strategic, nor sustainable. The increasing rate of infection over the past days indicate that pandemic is yet to peak, before the curve is flattened. The lockdown may still be extended again despite the additional two weeks that has been added to the initial two-week period.

Physical hearings can still be held for ex-parte applications, originating summons, fundamental rights applications and appellate cases, where testimony of witnesses are not required. The judiciary should put measures in place to ensure that physical distancing is observed, and hand-washing facilities and hand sanitisers provided.

this is in addition to temperature and other health checks to be carried out before anyone is admitted into the court premises. Allocation of time for separate hearing of the different cases will also reduce the risk of physical contact.

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02

Compliance with provisions of the Administration of Criminal Justice Act (ACJA)

One of the key measures of the efficiency or effectiveness of the justice sector is to look at the number of awaiting trial detainees. Presently, the percentage of awaiting trial inmates in Nigeria hovers around 70% of the prison population. The adoption and passage of the ACJA at the Federal level, and the ACJ laws in the states is partly aimed at redressing this anomaly.

The Act provides for the administration of criminal justice system which promotes efficient management of criminal justice institutions, speedy dispensation of justice, protection of the society from crimes and protection of the rights and interest of the suspect, the defendant and the victims in Nigeria.

Innovations introduced by the ACJA include: abolition of the holding charge and introduction of remand proceedings; alternatives to custodial sentences and the requirements of monthly reporting by police officers to magistrates on arrests and the inspection of police stations by Chief Magistrates monthly.

While the lockdown of the courts last, the visit to police stations by Chief Magistrates can be implemented to release or grant bail to suspects, while still observing the social and physical distancing guidelines.

Remote hearing of cases

Remote hearings are already taking place in the United States of America, United Kingdom, Italy, India, Kenya and Uganda in response to the challenges resulting from the pandemic.

In a letter to the Chief Justice of Nigeria titled '[Remote court hearings: a necessity in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic](#)' the Justice Reform Project noted the effect of the pandemic on the justice administration system in Nigeria and called for the adoption of available, simple and inexpensive technology by the courts for remote hearing of cases as is being done in other jurisdictions.

Applications like WhatsApp, Skype, Zoom and other video conferencing facilities can be deployed for the remote hearings.

Electronic filing of cases

There is certainly no reason why cases should still be filed manually in Nigerian courts in this day and age, given the efficiency that will be achieved if cases are filed electronically.

Although the Supreme Court has issued guidelines for electronic filing of cases, other courts need to follow suit at both federal and state levels. E-filing will save cost, man hours, ensure a reliable database of court documents and reduce delays associated with manual filing of cases. It will also reduce corruption in the judiciary if electronic payment goes with the electronic filing of cases.

Development and deployment of a case management system

The absence of standardised case management systems and principles across the various levels of courts and jurisdiction leaves the discretion of court management to the presiding judicial officers. This results in the application of different standards for different courts and jurisdictions. Basic ICT tools like excel can be deployed for simple e-case management systems, while the issuance of practice directions by the Heads of Courts to regulate the management of cases in court will definitely improve judicial efficiency.

Deployment of ICT solutions is however not possible without steady and efficient power supply. It is necessary for all courts to be equipped with power supply from electricity distributors, as well as alternate power supply such as generators to ensure effective deployment of ICT solutions.

04

ICT infrastructure development

The use of ICT in the delivery of justice by the judiciary cannot take place if the necessary infrastructure is lacking. Courts need to be well-equipped to deploy technology in improving service delivery. This involves the allocation of adequate resources for the provision of necessary equipment.

One of the factors that contribute substantially to the delay of cases is the absence of verbatim reporters in the court systems. The judicial officers have to manually record witness testimonies and submissions of lawyers. If this can be done technically, then the judicial officer can then focus on the observation of the demeanour of witnesses and directing the affairs of the courts.

Even if the necessary infrastructure is in place, the equipment cannot operate itself. A well-trained and dedicated staff is needed for the equipment to function. This will involve the training of existing staff and the recruitment of new competent staff to drive the process. Training for judicial officers on the use of ICT is absolutely necessary in deepening technological penetration of the judicial sector.

05

Autonomy and Funding

The fight for the independence of the judiciary is still ongoing. Recent events regarding executive interference in the appointments and elevation of judicial officers buttress this assertion. The non-implementation of full judicial and financial autonomy as envisaged under the constitution has inhibited the judiciary's ability to fulfil its mandate without interference.

The executive arm continues to use the withholding of funds due to the judiciary as a means of influence or control. The implementation of judicial autonomy will no doubt reposition the judiciary for efficient and effective service delivery.

06

Prompt delivery of pending judgments

Prior to the shutdown of courts occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, some judicial officers have concluded hearing in certain cases pending before them. It must be noted that under S.294(1) of the Constitution, judges are required to deliver judgment not later than 90 days from the date of conclusion of trial.

Heads of Courts need to issue circulars to all judicial officers reminding

them of this legal requirement and enjoin them to use the period of lockdown to prepare the judgments for delivery. This will ensure that when the courts resume, judges will be more concerned with dealing with the backlog of cases rather than writing judgment arising from concluded trials prior to the COVID-19 induced lockdown. Lawyers who have cases that have reached the address stage may be invited to file their final

addresses and the judges can then adjourn for judgment. Delivery of the judgment can be done through publication on the courts' websites or by being e-mailed to the lawyers of the parties in the case, or to the parties themselves.



Conclusion

From the foregoing, it can be seen that the COVID-19 pandemic has serious impact and grave implications for the delivery of judicial services across the country. The rising rate of infections suggest that the restrictions placed pursuant to the COVID-19 Regulations at both the federal and state levels may not be lifted soon.

It therefore places a responsibility on both judicial and executive policy-makers to strategize on how to make the best out of a challenging situation. Some of the recommendations above require immediate action to achieve the desired objectives. There appears to be a consensus on the need to reinvent judicial processes to make them more efficient in Nigeria.

The divergence of opinion lies in the prescriptions as to how to make it practical and implementable and the concrete actions needed to realise them. There are some low hanging fruits that can be easily realised. A reorientation of our security personnel on the rules of engagement with citizens and the use of force, will go a long way in reducing the level of human rights violations and the consequent litigations arising therefrom. This will reduce the caseload of the judiciary.

The designation of court officials and lawyers as providers of essential services in order to exempt them from the movement restrictions will help guarantee the due process rights of citizens accused of contravening the restriction of movement orders.

The Nigerian Attorney-General and Minister of Justice Abubakar Malami has emphasized the urgent need for a paradigm shift to adjust the judicial process to make for recovery of lost ground occasioned by the lockdown. He called for the implementation of the Judiciary Information Technology Policy adopted in 2012 to enable remote hearings, the appointment of additional judges and empowering the institutions of the Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015 to perform optimally.

The Federal Ministry of Justice can liaise with the Chief Justice of Nigeria and the National Judicial Council (NJC) to set up a committee to develop a road-map and works towards its realisation. this Committee can be made up of judicial officers, court administrators, prosecutors, Nigerian Bar Association, FIDA and some ICT professionals.

While recognising the limits of physical meetings in the light of COVID-19, the Committee may conduct virtual meetings to chart the way forward. The Chief Judge of Lagos state has just issued a practice direction to regulate electronic filing and service of court processes and remote hearings and delivery of judgment. This PD can become a draft model which can be shared with all Heads of Courts for their input before a unified draft is agreed upon for adoption by states.

We must however not lose sight of the need for budgetary outlay to cover such a deployment. The Attorney General of the Federation can play a key role in ensuring that the necessary political will is generated on the part of the government to ensure implementation of the road-map.

While some of these measures are aimed at mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on the judiciary, we must not lose sight of the fact that they represent pointers to the future of legal and judicial practice in Nigeria. The judicial sector in Nigeria must be able, ready and willing to adapt to post-COVID-19 realities. It is also important to develop strategies aimed at mainstreaming gender in the judicial sector.

this is to redress the limited involvement of women in the decision-making process in the judiciary and ensure the adoption of gender-sensitive policies and practices. These practices if adopted and implemented will narrow the gender equity gap and advance the quest for the enthronement of an egalitarian society.

It is surprising to note that despite the glaring impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and girls, the Ministry of Women Affairs was left out in the composition of the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19. The Civil Society

Alliance on COVID-19 has therefore called on the president to strengthen the Presidential Task Force by including the Women Affairs Ministry and other stakeholders.

The Alliance also called for a partial reopening of the judicial system in keeping with the need for rule of law and security measures, as well as the use of internationally proven approaches for remote hearings. These recommendations if adopted and implemented, will go a long way towards mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the judicial sector, and improve its efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of services to the people.



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